Gentler Means

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Gentler Means

by stoic_swan

Summary

Will doesn't leave Hannibal's dinner party for his date with the Chesapeake Ripper. As a result, Hannibal alerts Will of his encephalitis that night and uses Will's recovery to explore his curiosity about friendship-- and what makes Will Graham fascinating. Hannibal's growing affinity for Will compels him to use a somewhat softer approach to influencing the man than he had originally planned, and Will isn't impervious to becoming the object of someone's affection after a lifetime of self-imposed social isolation.

TL;DR: S1 goes in a much fluffier direction as of "Sorbet." Will is Will. Hannibal is Hannibal, just a smidge closer to the man we know and love by the end of S3.

Notes

I should be working on the series I'm halfway through with, but instead I'm writing semi-fluff.

Chapter 1

Hannibal poured the pink-tinged liquid into a glass dish. Will fidgeted with the wine bottle between his hands as he pictured the dish the other man was describing; the idea of tomatoes in sow's blood-- even just the water from centrifuged blood-- made him feel queasy. He was sure Hannibal was correct and would serve something delicious and exotic, but Will had felt sick, feverish all day. His head had continued bothering him, and the combination of fatigue and pain made eating almost impossible. Will's imagination was too vivid for him to convince himself to be enticed by the thick liquid sitting on the island in front of him. Hannibal looked up at him from his bent position at the island, working on the evening's meal.

"Are you sure you can't stay?" Hannibal questioned. He sounded sincere in his invitation.

"I don't think I'd be good company," Will sighed, mind back at his desk with the Ripper photos.

"I disagree," Hannibal quickly replied. He stood straight and scanned his gaze over Will's body. Will wished he could shrink into himself, away from the analytical eyes of Dr. Lecter; this feeling was amplified when Hannibal paused his work completely to stare at him. "Do you feel unwell, Will?"

Will reached into his coat pocket and retrieved his bottle of aspirin. He shook it lightly as he said, "Nothing self-medication can't fix. Tired, mostly."

Hannibal's face was set into an expression Will usually only caught during their "conversations" that were not in any way therapy sessions. Hannibal had sensed something invisible to the others around them and was picking it apart in his brain, mental talons sharp and tearing.

"You're ill. Have you been taking aspirin often lately?"

Will half-shrugged and let his eyes wander to watch the action of one of the hired servers.

"More than usual, maybe. I get headaches."

"Have they increased in frequency?"

Will's gaze continued moving around the kitchen, surveying the action. He wasn't going to lie to Hannibal-- he and Alana were the closest Will had to what might be considered friends. Dr. Lecter was trying to help him, and Will felt like he owed Hannibal continued honesty in return for the informal brand of psychiatry he used with Will.

"Yes."

"And your sleep habits-- have they always been this poor?"

Will wanted to be defensive, but then he recalled missing his appointment with Hannibal just a day ago because he fell asleep, eyes wide open.

“I’ve gotten worse,” he conceded, then quickly added, “but you’ve seen the reasons why spread across my desk.”

Hannibal came around the island, and Will had to force himself to stay still instead of take a large step backward, away from the man. Hannibal was close to him now, and the intensity he examined him with was startling. Will couldn’t imagine being one of Hannibal’s ER patients; he would’ve taken one look at the man and decided death was a more comfortable option.

“May I?” Hannibal asked, holding up a hand.

Will wasn’t sure what he was granting Hannibal permission for, but he gave a single nod rather than attempt coherent speech. Hannibal brought the back of his hand briefly to Will’s cheek; Hannibal ignored Will’s wince and moved the hand upward, planting more firmly against his forehead. Will felt like a child, but the awkwardness of the physical touch dwindled when he felt how cool Hannibal’s hand was against his forehead. He let his eyes blink heavily under the cool skin before snapping them back open in alarm. If Hannibal’s hand felt that cool, how warm must Will be? Hannibal dropped his hand and exhaled just loudly enough for Will to hear.

“Please don’t be offended,” Hannibal warned, and yet again, Will’s brain struggled to predict what it was he need not be offended by. When Hannibal crooked his head slightly lower, nearer to Will’s neck, and took a deep inhale, he understood perfectly well why Hannibal had offered the disclaimer.

“Did you just *smell* me?” Will couldn’t stop the accusatory words before they escaped his mouth.

“Encephalitis,” Hannibal replied, which was not at all the answer one might normally provide to the question Will asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I believe you have encephalitis. There’s a smell-- extremely faint, but my nose is particularly sensitive. I smelled it only once before, during my time as a surgeon. The symptoms you are experiencing support the diagnosis, though.”

“Headaches and sleeping poorly could be caused by almost anything,” Will retorted, unsure why he was arguing.

“True, but your waking dreams are unusual, and the smell of the illness is extremely noticeable in close proximity.”

Will gave the other man a dirty look, appropriate thanks for telling him his brain was defective and he smelled weird.

Hannibal continued, “I can recommend a neurologist. We were residents together at Johns Hopkins. I am certain he would be amenable to seeing you on short notice.”

This felt like a favor, and Will did not enjoy feeling like he owed anyone, friend or not. Still, his head pounded, and he felt detached from the world around him. He couldn’t continue living like this. Plus, if he died because of his own stubbornness, Jack Crawford would have him revived just to kill him again himself.

“I would appreciate that,” he ground out, not actually sounding especially appreciative in the moment.

As always, Hannibal took the surliness in stride; he gave him a pat on the arm and returned to the island. Will still grasped at the bottle of wine in his hands.

“I know you are keen to return to your files of crime scene photographs, but I would consider it a personal favor if you stayed. I am not comfortable with the idea of you driving; encephalitis can induce seizures and blackouts. I can drive you home tonight myself, or you can stay in one of my guest rooms.”

The word *favor* stuck out like a waving yellow flag. Dr. Lecter had perceived Will’s reluctance to accept help, so he framed his continued assistance in a way that Will would find more palatable. It was manipulative, but it was also thoughtful.

“I don’t think so, Doctor. I’m not going to make you play taxi as soon as you finish your dinner party. My dogs--”

“Then I will drive you home tomorrow-- at the break of dawn-- to attend to your dogs.”

Will finally sat the wine bottle down awkwardly on the island. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, pleading with the pressure in his head to stop for just a few moments so that he could handle this situation clearly.

“It’s your choice, of course, but I would be deeply worried for your safety.”

Will huffed, dropped his hands to his sides and said, “Fine.” Feeling like he was perhaps being a tad unfair to Hannibal, he added, “Thanks.”

They stood in companionable quiet for a moment. When Hannibal did speak again, he didn’t look at Will.

“What I’m about to offer is terribly inappropriate…,” Hannibal trailed off. He halted his work and hurriedly left the room, leaving Will to stare at the empty space where he had just been standing. When he returned, he had a glass bottle with large, white pills. Hannibal poured a cup of water and brought both the water and the bottle to Will, who was still watching him curiously from the place he had remained glued to since he arrived.

“Hydrocodone,” Hannibal said simply. “You might find the night more tolerable if it is colored by chemicals that cannot be purchased over-the-counter.”

Normally, Will would decline any medication that would dull him; his brain destroying itself within his skull, however, was not at all normal, and eating aspirin like candy couldn't be good for him. He accepted the pills and the water.

"One every four hours, maximum. And no drinking," Hannibal warned, sounding very much like a doctor.

Will gulped a pill back with a mouthful of water and dutifully glanced at the clock.

Alana materialized in the doorway, her deep red, v-neck dress popping against her fair skin and raven hair. Will tried to look at her without seeming like he was looking.

"Your guests are demanding your presence, Hannibal. They think you've gone into hiding," she teasingly scolded, a large smile spreading across her face. Her eyes looked a little bit glassy, but Will didn't think it was from the wine. *Oh,* Will thought, the foreign feeling of naïveté almost bringing a blush.

Hannibal smiled back, serene and friendly.

"One must create proper anticipation," he answered.

Will felt incredibly stupid for not having seen this coming. Alana and Hannibal made sense-- far more sense than Alana and Will did.

Alana caught sight of Will, surprised.

"Will! I thought you said you weren't coming-- are you just dropping by? Is something wrong?"

Will was annoyed that something had to be wrong for him to be at a social event. Of course, the only reason he was still there was because he apparently had a horrible illness, so maybe she wasn't so wrong. Will opened his mouth to speak, not sure what he was going to say.

"I was…"

"Will *was* going to leave, but I've convinced him to stay. Alana, could you ask the servers to put Will's bottle of wine in their rotation?" Hannibal nodded at the bottle. Alana gave Will a personable but not overly-warm smile and grabbed the bottle.

"No problem. If I can help, tell me. Don't be stubborn and miss your own party," she admonished as she exited.

"Take her offer. You wouldn't want my help," Will supplied as soon as Alana was gone. Hannibal gave him a half-smile, barely showing his teeth.

It was an odd thing to fixate on, but Will had a small fascination with the man's teeth. Every inch of him was coiffed and polished until he was more appearance than person-- except his teeth. They were the only part of him that was visibly imperfect in the way that all other mere mortals-- Will included-- lacked perfection.

“This question may be forward--”

“You sniffed me.”

Will’s deadpan earned him another smile.

“Tell me, do you have feelings for Alana?”

Will swallowed hard. He didn't speak for at least a full minute.

“She’s...pretty, and she’s smart. She treats me like a person more than most people. She likes my dogs.”

“Is that your circular way of saying ‘yes,’ or is the answer more complicated?”

“The answer is always more complicated. I don’t think she sees me that way. She’s too in love with psychology. I can’t blame her for that.”

“You could, but you choose not to. You accept her as she is, just as you would like to be accepted as you are.”

“I think that was almost a compliment, Dr. Lecter. Better be careful,” Will deflected. “Can I ask the same question of you: Do you have feelings for Alana?”

Hannibal’s work didn’t so much as stumble as he answered; his constant self-possession was enviable.

“I have known Alana for many years now. I agree with your assessment-- she is, indeed, pretty, smart, and in love with psychology. She cooked with me one evening this week. I admit flirtation on my part.”

“I cannot imagine you flirting,” Will blurted, trying desperately to imagine Hannibal dropping cliche lines. He could imagine the man being charming, of course, but flirting was a very different ballgame.

“I have other strengths,” Hannibal asserted good-naturedly.

“When Alana came in, she looked at you like you’d been missing at sea, not cooped up in a kitchen with me. She likes you.”

Hannibal thought about this statement, then regretfully responded, “Then I was remiss to flirt with her.”

Will cocked his head slightly to the side. He was bad at romance, but he was pretty sure flirting with someone you find attractive is considered a good thing to do.

Hannibal continued, “I enjoy her as a person and as a friend. I would not seek a relationship with her, which is what she would want. I am thankful once again for your powers of observation, Will.”

There was some behavioral math that wasn't adding up right in Will's mind. The pounding had subsided the faintest bit, though, and he felt a little loose-limbed. It was pleasant, and their conversation had reached a point where the two men more or less understood one another.

"I should let you work. I'm going to go not talk to people," Will quipped. He felt horrifically underdressed.

"You may stay if you'd like. I'm inclined to think you are keeping the others away. Yet another favor I must repay you for one day," Hannibal caught his eyes. He looked incredibly sincere.

Will chuckled at the notion of his antisocial aura protecting the realm of the kitchen.

"Let me do something. I don't think my head is in danger of exploding on your hors d'oeuvres."

Hannibal waved him around the island with his index finger and put a cutting board, a knife, and a silver tray in front of Will. He then went to the refrigerator and pulled out a cold, metal baking sheet with meats laid neatly in rows.

"You can plate the charcuterie," Hannibal directed. He spotted a sheet of paper, plucked it off the counter, and laid it before Will. "Here's the diagram I drew for the servers. Fool-proof."

His gratefulness to be away from the pretentious crowd stopped Will from commenting on how ridiculous and micromanaging it was to draw a charcuterie diagram.

"You underestimate my foolishness, Dr. Lecter."

The older man ignored the comment, but Will saw the fine lines of a hidden smile appear around his eyes.

Chapter 2

As dinner guests filed into the dining room oohing and ahhing at the ornate spread of trays across, Hannibal stood in a dark suit with a hand on the two chairs to the immediate left of the head of the table. He caught Will and Alana's eyes.

"Alana," he said and pulled out the chair further away. "Will," he pulled out the chair next to his own.

Will disliked the attention that being essentially reserved a seat might call to him among the guests, all of whom seemed to be at least passingly familiar with one another; however, he could not fault Dr. Lecter for ensuring he was wedged between the only people in the room he knew. The cynical part of Will wondered if Hannibal was worried about his ability to play nicely with others in the formal setting, but he didn't truly believe this was the motivation. Will thought briefly of the protein scramble Hannibal had brought to his motel room the morning of the last day of Garrett Jacob Hobbs' life. Will had not minced words with the strange man during their first meeting in Jack's office, yet there he was, breakfast in hand, on Will's motel room doorstep. Maybe he was actually a thoughtful person who just wanted to be Will's friend. It was a troubling idea.

Hannibal gave a toast and an explanation of the evening's menu. The numbing of the painkiller was effective enough that Will's appetite finally made a reappearance, and he examined each dish as it was described. His mouth watered, and he recalled the familiar sight of his dogs sitting patiently but hungrily as Will filled their bowls. Presentation over, plates were filled with food and appreciative chatter filled the air. The guests spared no adjective in their praise of the meal: *delectable, exquisite, lucious.* Will began to seriously ponder whether they all consulted a thesaurus prior to dinner parties when an attractive woman with long, dark hair used the word "piquant" to describe one of the sauces.

Will was content to eat in silence, drink his sparkling water, and observe the others discreetly. His tablemates did not share this preference. Midway through dinner, the conversation finally turned to the mysterious person seated by the host's side.

"So, Dr. Lecter, who is your friend?" a man with a square jaw, prominent nose, and noticeably tacky tie called to Hannibal from the end of the table. He nodded his head toward Will. "You look familiar, but I can't place it."

The affably relaxed expression on Hannibal's face didn't quite change, but from his vantage point, Will believed he saw Hannibal's fingers grip the stem of his wine glass slightly more firmly. Perhaps there was a reason the man was seated as far away from Hannibal as possible.

"I've been terribly rude this evening, I'm afraid. I persuaded Mr. Graham to be my second set of hands, thus depriving him of making your acquaintance."

"Graham," the man repeated, clearly filing through a mental rolodex.

"Will Graham," Will finally introduced.

“Dr. Cal Barnett,” the man returned. “Why do you seem so familiar? Are you related to someone I know?”

The question was patently ridiculous-- how could Will divine whether or not they shared a mutual acquaintance? Will knew the reason the man recognized him had nothing to do with mystery relatives or social circles.

“No, I don’t think so. My family is from Louisiana.”

Will decided that if Cal Barnett wanted to pretend familiarity, he would have to admit to subscribing to TattleCrime. *The New Yorker* it was not.

“Eh, that’s not it then,” Cal conceded and took a large sip of his wine.

The woman across from Will, an opera patron named Mrs. Komeda, interceded with a question she probably thought was more neutral. She was wrong in that assumption.

“What do you do, Mr. Graham?”

“I teach,” Will said uneasily.

“He’s a professor at Quantico. He teaches FBI trainees,” Alana supplied helpfully, ripping off the BandAid.

A murmur of interest went around the table.

“How fascinating! You must be highly regarded in your field. What do you teach?”

“Forensic science and psychology. It’s glorified profiling,” Will explained vaguely.

“Do you go to crime scenes?” Mrs. Komeda pushed, still not reading Will’s discomfort with the line of questioning.

“Only lately. My work is mostly in the classroom. It’s more boring than television makes it seem.”

“That’s it!” Cal called out, pulling everyone’s eyes from Will toward the other end of the table. “I saw you on the news. You were involved with the Minnesota Shrike case. The fellow who ate girls that looked like his daughter. You had to shoot him. Now, that couldn’t have been boring.”

Will set his mouth in a straight line and swallowed hard.

“Cal, I don’t think Freddie Lounds counts as the news,” Alana chided. “And I don’t think this is a discussion appropriate for the dinner table.”

“Live a little, Dr. Bloom,” Cal laughed, undeterred. “Mr. Graham is one of the most fascinating cases in modern psychiatric study. Well, if he’d let any of us study him, that is. Why the reluctance?”

“My *reluctance* to allow professionals unfettered access to my brain confuses you? If only there was a field dedicated to understanding the workings of the human mind.”

“Ouch, Mr. Graham,” Cal sneered. “But I guess I have to compete with the FBI now, huh?”

Will sounded as courteous as he could in that moment when he replied, “You could join them. Apparently, they’re letting anyone in now. They might even find you acceptable.”

Cal looked less entertained but more aggressive, redness rising to his cheeks.

“Some lucky doctor had to clear you for field work, I presume. I wonder if they’d be willing to share anonymous details with an interested colleague.”

Cal looked at Alana knowingly, incorrectly presuming her connection to the FBI meant she had been the one to rubber stamp him.

“Any respectable doctor would balk at you invading their patient’s privacy, just as you’re doing now,” Alana fired back. Will noticed a protective streak in her before, but she was blatantly angry at the moment.

“Alana, it’s fine. Some people mistakenly consider my brain public domain,” Will said without looking at Barnett.

“I don’t mean to offend, Mr. Graham, I’m just surprised you’ve graced us with your presence. You’re notoriously hard to find. The word ‘reclusive’ gets thrown around in certain psychiatric circles.”

The idea of *circles* discussing Will caused the nausea to come back with a vengeance. Intellectually, he already knew this; seeing one of those individuals in the wild was different.

“You found me. Congratulations,” Will hissed.

“Actually, Dr. Lecter seems to be the one who found you,” Cal retorted, looking at the head of the table.

Hannibal studied his wine glass with dark eyes.

“Do you describe all friendships so crudely, Cal?” Hannibal answered, voice low and calm but coming from a very tight jaw.

“Hannibal, I didn’t mean anything by it. We’re all just getting to know one another.”

“It is evident how well Will wishes to be known by you. I marvel at your professional success if you cannot see that boundary yourself.”

The surprised looks on the faces of the other guests indicated what Will already suspected: Hannibal was not known for unkind words, even to a boorish guest. Cal finally looked embarrassed.

“I apologize, Mr. Graham. I think I’ve had a glass too much wine this evening.”

Will didn't acknowledge the apology; it came from Hannibal's admonishment, not genuine contrition.

"And I'm sorry to you, too, Hannibal. Dr. Bloom was right-- this is not appropriate table talk."

"No worries, Dr. Barnett," Hannibal accepted tersely.

Will burned a hole into his plate with his eyes, wishing to be swallowed by his chair.

A few long, silent moments passed, nobody speaking or eating. A woman cleared her throat.

"I breed Bichon Frises," Mrs. Komeda finally said, breaking the silence. She was looking directly at Will. He returned her expectant stare with widened eyes. "Hannibal told me you like dogs."

The drastic change in topic was bewildering enough that Will actually smiled at the woman who was looking at him with the same cheery expression she had when she'd first begun their conversation before it was hijacked by Cal Barnett.

"I love dogs," Will answered simply, and the air returned to the dining room. Chatter resumed, and Will found himself and Alana engaged in a conversation about the wonders of canines with the kind Mrs. Komeda. Hannibal mostly listened, though he added that he grew up with hounds and learned to hunt with them. He did not elaborate much, but Will added the image of a young Hannibal roaming an overgrown estate with a pack of dogs to his slowly-expanding mental file on the doctor.

When the night ended and people were trickling out the door, Cal Barnett found Will again.

"Mr. Graham, I just wanted to apologize personally. It's clear I don't handle my alcohol as well as I used to. Or, as my wife told me a few minutes ago, I was an ass."

The man held his hand out to Will, who glanced at it but didn't take it. Another apology driven by shame instead of remorse.

"It's over now, and I doubt we will see one another again," Will evenly stated and turned away without another glance.

Eventually, only Hannibal, Alana, Will, and two servers tasked with cleaning were left in the house. The servers hustled back and forth between the dining room and kitchen, clearing and washing. The three friends stood in the foyer.

"The food was amazing, Hannibal," Alana complimented.

"Thank you, I enjoyed the evening. Mostly." He looked at Will on the last word.

"The Cal Barnetts of the world have been in my life since I was old enough to be diagnosed with anything," Will explained.

"It was still wrong," Alana sharply affirmed.

“I owe you an apology as well,” Hannibal began.

“Should I mark this one on the calendar? I know you like to spread them out.”

The corners of Hannibal’s mouth lifted upward microscopically in spite of his serious eyes.

“I’m sorry I intervened,” Hannibal said. “I am well aware you are more than capable of fighting your own battles. I was torn between my duties as a host and as your friend. I am not certain I handled the situation well.”

When Will recounted the conversation, he realized Hannibal hadn’t stepped in until Cal solicited his input. It gave Will a strange sense of unexpected warmth toward the man-- his statement in the motel that Will was a mongoose, not a teacup, seemed to come from a genuine belief. It was a new dynamic in Will’s life to have someone trust him to handle himself.

“Cal made the choice to create a competition with no winners,” Will commented.

Alana looked slightly taken aback at the words, probably expecting a more conventional exchange of apologies, but the look of understanding that passed between the men caught whatever she was about to say in her throat. She pivoted back to familiar territory.

“In spite of Cal, it really was lovely,” Alana concluded. She opened the door and turned around, anticipating Will following closely behind her. Confusion furrowed her brow when she noticed he had not moved. She hinted, “I’ll walk you to your car, Will.”

“I, uh…” Will pinched the bridge of his nose, collecting his thoughts. “I am staying here. Tonight. In a guest room.” The piecemeal sentence was far from an apt explanation. “I am going to see a doctor. Not Dr. Lecter. A neurologist.”

Will sighed, realizing how convoluted he was making this. It sounded more suspect than the truth.

“Hannibal thinks I might be sick, and he has gotten me an appointment with a neurologist. I probably shouldn’t drive until then.”

Alana looked at Hannibal, the question *“Why didn’t you mention this?”* written across her face even though she didn’t speak it.

“What kind of illness, Hannibal?”

“Encephalitis. I’m admittedly not a neurologist, but there are signs.” There was no give in Hannibal’s voice. He was not sorry for keeping the information undisclosed.

“That’s incredibly dangerous. How long has this been going on?”

“I only suspected it this evening.”

“The sooner treatment is started, the better the outcome. This shouldn’t wait,” she demanded.

“Alana,” Will cut in, “I’m not going to the ER. They’ll just tell me to see a specialist.”

She gave an exasperated sigh, knowing he was right but also wanting a solution right then.

“Donald Sutcliffe has worked Will in at 8 AM, before any other patients. No need to worry, Alana. I’ll keep an eye on the symptoms until then.”

Will watched as Alana’s short-lived indignation at Hannibal faded.

“Let me know how the appointment goes,” she said to both men firmly.

“Of course,” Hannibal lilted.

“Sure, I guess,” Will simultaneously grumbled.

She looked between them, let her gaze settle affectionately on Hannibal for a moment too long, and left. Will wondered if she would have kissed Hannibal had he not been there. Hannibal could claim he was not going to pursue a romantic relationship with Alana, but saying that and actually avoiding the very kissable temptation standing in your foyer were two different things.

The man’s voice interrupted Will’s useless game of what-if: “We’ll be up early if we want to see to your dogs before the appointment. I’ll show you to the guest room.”

Will followed Hannibal into the depths of the house, absorbing every ornate piece of decor. He touched a statuette of a bird perched on a twisted tree limb just to see if an alarm would go off, like in a museum. He was a little disappointed when nothing happened.

Hannibal opened a door and flipped on the room’s light switch. There was a queen-sized bed with a gray velvet headboard and color-matched comforter set. Too many pillows lined the top of the bed in crisp white. Antique bedside tables in distressed dark wood sat on either side of the bed, and there was a writing desk in the corner of the room. The space was bigger than the unused master bedroom at Will’s house.

“This is the only bedroom other than the master with a bathroom en suite. There are clean towels inside. Is there anything I can get for you?”

Will shook his head, tired and awkward-- maybe just tired from a night of feeling awkward.

“This is great. Thanks,” Will lamely answered.

“My bedroom is the last one at the end of the hall,” Hannibal pointed out. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“You know I’m not going to ask you for anything,” Will said as he looked around the guest room.

Hannibal gave his familiar half-smile and replied, “But now you know you can.”

Will returned the look and watched as the door closed.

Chapter 3

Will woke up still in the hospital bed and tried to ignore the scratchiness of the sheets. It was just as uncomfortable as he had imagined when Dr. Sutcliffe told him he would be admitted for first line therapy, namely aggressive steroid treatment and meticulous monitoring of symptoms. Will tried to focus on the glittering silver lining: He wasn't losing his mind. He had a physical ailment that could be treated. He was only his normal kind of crazy.

Hannibal had pulled unknown strings to get Will examined by a respected neurologist merely hours after suspecting anything was wrong, and now he was back at Will's house-- despite enthusiastic protest-- collecting clothing so that Will wasn't stuck in hospital gowns. There was not a favor Will could find that was big enough to repay the man.

Will slept most of the day. After the diagnosis and hospital intake, he was pumped full of medications. He called Alana to tell her the news and then fell deeply asleep, the combination of the medication and his relief lulling him into blackness. Waking up in the darkened hospital room was eerie. For a split second, he had the horrifying feeling he had died and was caught in some bureaucratic underworld. The notion was shaken easily enough, but it unsettled him. Hannibal carefully opening the door and checking to see if he was awake was a welcome sight.

"I'm up. Kinda," Will groaned.

Hannibal entered looking expectedly immaculate. If he hadn't been so damn helpful, Will would taunt him for the quality of his appearance being inversely proportional to Will's.

"It will take time to feel fully healed-- months, perhaps. Focus on feeling better, not complete recovery. That way lies frustration."

A heavy sigh escaped Will, and Hannibal looked at the reluctant patient with no small amount of amusement. Hannibal put a black leather weekender bag that Will definitely did not own on a chair near the foot of the bed; he brought the tote in his other hand up to Will's bedside.

"I thought you might find yourself becoming bored," Hannibal explained as he withdrew multiple books. He also gave Will a flimsy paperback of "brain teasers"-- primarily sudoku and crosswords-- which probably came from the hospital gift shop.

"You don't want me terrorizing the nurses," Will remarked as he flipped through the booklet.

"I'd like to maintain their good will," Hannibal half-answered. He reached back into the tote more carefully to retrieve the final items.

"Buy your bag from Mary Poppins?" Will joked, though he wasn't sure Hannibal was well-versed in Disney. Hannibal ignored the comment either way.

“Dinner,” he said, pulling out two covered bowls and walking to the table at the side of the room to put down the containers. He produced the final items from the bag-- a thermos and two sets of silverware rolled in white linen napkins.

When he opened the containers and a rich, meaty aroma choked out the stale hospital air, Will forgot the sarcastic remark he was preparing.

“That smells delicious.”

Hannibal broke his concentration for a moment to smile, always proud of his cooking, and then launched into the details of the dish-- which apparently included some sort of black-skinned chicken. Will considered the description and surmised, “You made me chicken soup.”

Hannibal was rarely caught off guard, but this moment was one of the exceptions. He blinked once dramatically at Will’s reductive statement.

“Yes,” he finally confirmed.

They sat at the table together eating the fancy chicken soup.

“Alana is going to go to my house tonight to let the dogs out. I need to hire someone.” Will grimaced at the thought of a stranger in his house.

“She and I will ensure the dogs are cared for during your hospital stay. Don’t concern yourself with that,” Hannibal said, as though it was obvious.

“This is strange,” Will spoke the thought aloud.

“Allowing others to help you?” Hannibal guessed correctly.

“Yeah. I don’t do...help. Friends. It seems like it all just happened to me.”

“You have the agency to put a stop to any friendship you find yourself unwittingly a part of. Friendship is too rare a commodity for it to ‘just happen’ to a man as bright as yourself.”

Will shrugged noncommittally and took a long sip of green tea. The warmth was soothing in the cold hospital.

“I spoke to Jack,” Hannibal started without looking at Will. “I hope you don’t find that intrusive. I only told him you were dealing with a medical situation and would not likely be available to him for a time.”

Will was sure Jack liked to hear that. He was surprised the man hadn’t called him-- repeatedly-- yet.

“Did you tell him to leave me alone, too?” Will asked, not sure if he was irritated by Hannibal’s interference yet or not.

“In somewhat more courteous terms, yes.”

A dry laugh escaped Will's chest at that, and he supposed he couldn't be too mad at Dr. Lecter for giving him a reprieve.

"So, I should expect him to call tomorrow. Or visit…" It was a cringeworthy thought. Although, Will wouldn't mind being left with a new stack of crime scene photographs to work through.

Hannibal nodded, affirmative, then added, "Jack is a reasonable man, more or less. He understands the debilitating nature of illness perhaps more than most."

Will felt a shot of guilt at the thought of Bella.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Will savoring the broth. He wondered if every meal without a skull-cracking headache would be this good. As they finished and Hannibal started to clear the table, Will asked the real question that had been bouncing around his mind since that morning.

"Dr. Lecter?" Hannibal looked at him inquiringly. "Do you have any idea when they'll release me? I'm not a good patient."

"I'm aware," Hannibal deadpanned. "Some people remain hospitalized for weeks or even months with encephalitis. I'm glad to say your condition is not so severe. Still, the hallucinatory waking dreams were concerning for Donald-- for all of us. I would hazard to say a week if appropriate progress is made."

"A week is all I can stand. I'll go crazy if I'm stuck here any longer."

"A promise of job security," Hannibal commented. Will laughed, not expecting the joke from the man packing expensive containers back into his tote. "I'll do what I can to aid your early escape."

Will tucked himself back into the hospital bed, feeling sleepy and comforted by the suggestion of a concrete timeline. He watched as Hannibal took one last scan of the room, ostensibly making sure he didn't leave anything, although Will suspected he was also trying to find any error in the room that Will himself wouldn't know to complain about.

The man had assisted him so thoroughly over the previous two days; Will summoned his gratitude, an emotion he didn't express easily.

"Dr. Lecter, thank you," he said quietly, looking at the stack of books next to him on the bed.

"You saved my life. It's the least I can do."

There was something about how he said *You saved my life* that sounded hollow to Will's perceptive ears, but the reason was impossible to uncover.

"And please, Will, call me Hannibal. You're not my patient."

That statement, meanwhile, sounded sincere. Will wondered idly at the gap in tone-- a gap that he conceded might not even exist, that could be a product of his own misfiring brain.

“Hannibal,” Will repeated back. He’d called him that before occasionally, but it felt intentional now.

Hannibal’s expression was softer, more open when he said, “Good night, Will. I’ll bring dinner tomorrow.”

Will closed his eyes and was asleep before Hannibal made it to the elevator.

For the next week, Will did his best impression of an easygoing, compliant patient while complaining to Alana and Hannibal in the evenings about how the institutional white walls were thin enough to hear your neighbor coughing all night and how nurses walked right in the restroom no matter how many times you told them you were never catheterized. They indulged his complaints with affected sympathy. Jack visited once, two days in; he arrived in the morning and brought coffee, an olive branch. The next day, he had Alana drop off a casefile on a string of missing elderly women. Alana begrudgingly put the documents in Will’s eager hands with a few words on the side about how Jack was asking too much of Will still. She was equally unhappy when Jack gave Will the okay to share the documents with Hannibal, converting their evening meals to work sessions. Hannibal continued to bring dinner promptly each day at 7:30, their usual time.

On day six, Hannibal entered the room in a mood that might have read as detached by a stranger but that Will discerned to be closer to low-grade anxiety. He didn’t sit at first, needlessly examining the chart at the foot of Will’s bed. Finally, he addressed Will.

“They’ll release you tomorrow.”

Will brought his hands together in an imitation of praise. Drama was usually Hannibal’s domain, but this warranted some display of the unutterable joy that coursed through Will.

“Your doctor will tell you to spend an additional week at home, a precaution.”

If the doctor had told him to spend an additional week in a clown costume, Will would do it if it meant being at home safely with his dogs.

“Done. I won’t even go to Quantico,” Will swore.

“I suspected you would take no issue with that condition,” Hannibal replied. He looked like he had more to say, but he paused and sat down in one of the chairs by the table. “I am confident in your continued recovery, but would it be intrusive of me to make a request of you?”

Will partially expected Hannibal to suggest he take a longer leave of work, an idea frequently thrown out by Alana during her visits every other day.

“I owe you, but I can’t promise.”

“Would it be permissible for me to continue bringing you dinner until you’re cleared for work?”

Will stared at the man blankly, trying in vain to picture him sitting at the kitchen table in Will's home surrounded by his pack of dogs.

"Why?" Will asked bluntly.

"I had an appointment with my psychiatrist this afternoon," Hannibal began, his mind wandering back to that conversation. Will would give anything to meet his elusive psychiatrist. "You and I have a great deal more in common than one might think."

Will waited silently. Hannibal liked to talk, and if Will waited, he could avoid asking the wrong questions.

"We both have a habit of, as she suggested, building walls."

"Fort is your preferred term, I believe," Will interrupted, unable to let the jab pass unspoken.

"Forts have walls," Hannibal dryly responded. "I've avoided friendship to the same degree as I've accused you of. Hypocrisy doesn't suit me." Hannibal swallowed and fixed his gaze on a generic print of a country house hung on the wall opposite him. "Our nightly discussions of Jack's newest case-- and your myriad complaints-- have added something intangible but not unpleasant to each day. I suppose it feels like I've been pressing my ear against the wall to hear someone on the other side."

It was the most naked statement Hannibal had ever made to Will. It felt honest. He wondered how much of the man's session had been devoted to discussing Will either through metaphor or plainly.

Will thought carefully about the words and the sentiment behind them, not wanting to brashly respond since this seemed to be a point Hannibal had spent some time considering. On a basic level, Will looked forward to their discussions as well; they were less pointed than the probing talk that occurred in Hannibal's office. They were interesting and comfortable-- and it was hard to be comfortable with another person.

He sensed Hannibal had decided to turn the tables and wait Will out now. He thought for a moment longer trying to grasp the right words.

"After grad school, I had panic attacks almost every day," Will said, not sure where he was going yet. "I'd wake up knowing at some point, I would feel like I was dying. Sometimes the only thing that got me to leave my bed in the morning was my dogs. I made their lives better and knew that when I saw them, they would remind me that I wasn't alone in the world." Will sighed and concluded, "What I'm saying is, maybe I'm your *dog* in this metaphor..."

There was an uneasy few seconds of silence before the men smiled at the unusual but not entirely false comparison, quiet breaths of laughter escaping them.

"Maybe we should stick to the forts and walls," Will suggested lightly. "Listen, you're my not-therapist, so you know I don't 'do' friendship. I have gathered you don't either. And yet, here we are. I guess that means you can feed the sick puppy if you want to."

“But don’t feign surprise when it snaps?” Hannibal filled in.

Will looked away, but he was smiling under his frown. He really needed a non-canine analogy for their friendship.

They remained silent for multiple minutes, the sounds of the hospital outside the half-open door keeping the lack of speaking from becoming oppressive.

“Do you take dinner requests?” Will finally asked.

“No,” Hannibal definitively stated.

The rest of the evening proceeded as usual: They ate an overly-ornate dinner out of tupperware and poured over case details. Jack had dropped off additional documents at Hannibal’s office earlier that day, and the new information needed to either alter their working theory or assimilate into it.

The extent of the situation’s strangeness did not fully coalesce in Will’s mind until he was trying to sleep that night. He supposed he shouldn’t expect a normal friend. Yet, normal was relative; it was a bell curve with very few individuals falling dead center. They just happened to be on one end of the spectrum, but they were at that statistical point together, which was a comfort. It wasn't so bad to be an outlier if you weren't the only one.

Chapter 4

Will exited the hospital at 10:15 AM, the Saturday sun shining down on his face. He stopped for a moment on the sidewalk outside the main entrance just to feel the warmth. The past week had crept by, but now, his head was not pounding and he was bathed in golden light. This was his reward. He wandered the parking garage for a solid twenty minutes trying to find his car; at some point during the week, Alana had driven it here from where he had parked it outside Hannibal's house the previous Friday for the dinner party. Hannibal had helpfully taken her back to her own vehicle afterward.

Locating his car and turning the engine over, Will was glad he could leave directly from the hospital without relying on even further assistance from Alana and Hannibal. Between what they both had already done for him and what they would continue to do-- Alana picking up his classes for the next week and Hannibal acting as a one-man catering service-- Will was overwhelmed. He felt like each time either of them did something for him, he was shoveling out one more scoop of dirt from the grave he was digging for himself.

Thoughts of graves and favors gone unreturned were erased from Will's mind when he pulled up to his house. The dogs knew the specific sound his vehicle made, and a line of heads appeared in the living room window, some of which were only appearing in short bursts as the smaller dogs jumped up and down repeatedly under their larger packmates. All trained decorum vanished when Will opened the door. He let them maul him with unbridled affection as he sat down on a porch chair.

"I'm sorry I was gone so long," he apologized as he tried to pet six dogs at once.

Eventually the dogs settled enough for Will to go inside. The time away combined with the hyper-awareness that Hannibal would cross his threshold in a manner of hours prompted an immediate cleaning spree. He didn't think this is what the doctor had meant by continuing to heal at home, but it seemed like one task appeared after another: Sweeping the floor turned into vacuuming the rugs and mopping; vacuuming the rugs turned into cleaning the pet beds; cleaning the pet beds turned into changing Will's own sheets; changing his sheets turned into doing laundry. That particular spree didn't even touch the kitchen which, Will realized in a frustrated panic, was probably the most important part of the house for this particular visitor. He picked up his phone and dialed the first four digits of Hannibal's office number, ready to tell the man to stay in Baltimore, but he didn't finish the call, guilt getting the better of him at the last moment. Hannibal had been more than generous, and all he requested of Will was friendship and permission to cook for someone other than himself for a week. Will imagined the man had gotten used to having an appreciative audience for his culinary talents during Will's hospital stay, so if eating fancy food for a week was what Will had to do to begin evening the scales, he could make that sacrifice.

After his bout of motivational self-talk, Will finished cleaning the kitchen on pure adrenaline. By the time he had showered, changed, and taken the dogs on a pitifully brief walk, he couldn't do much more than take his next round of medication and collapse onto the couch. The sound of the dogs scrambling across the floor to the door and windows woke him up

hours later, the sky already dark. Hannibal's ostentatious black Bentley pulled to a stop, looking woefully out of place in Wolf Trap, Virginia. The dogs wagged their tails excitedly, having come to associate the man with food over the past week. Will's stomach growled audibly, and he realized with shame that he and the dogs shared that now.

Will opened the door before Hannibal had a chance to knock. The dogs crowded him but did not jump onto his pants, to Will's relief.

"Good evening," Hannibal said politely to his watchful audience. When he produced a bag of homemade jerky, Will understood how he had so rapidly earned their admiration.

Once each dog had a treat and had wandered away, the men finally turned to greet one another.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal intoned using the same voice as when he would open his office door to start their sessions.

"Hello...Hannibal," Will got out, almost using the now-forbidden moniker "Dr. Lecter."

"How are you feeling?"

"Free," Will answered immediately.

"Headaches?"

Will shook his head.

"Fatigue?"

He sighed in response.

"I am not here to scold, but you shouldn't have done so much housework on your first day out of the hospital. I hope it wasn't on my account," Hannibal said, scanning the room.

In retrospect, it was obvious Hannibal knew what the house looked like before Will's release-- he had been there every other day taking care of the dogs. Will felt inexplicable embarrassment and like he'd been caught doing something he ought not do.

"I barely moved the past week. I had spare energy today," Will lied thinly. Hannibal was polite enough to accept the white lie without further comment.

"The supplies are in my car. I suspected your friends might want their gifts before I began."

Hannibal briskly walked back out to his vehicle while Will looked at the traitorous canines merrily settling into their beds. Hannibal returned with a sleek cooler and fabric grocery bag; Will didn't recognize the store name stitched on the side.

"What's the menu tonight?" Will asked, searching his memory for clues as to how he spoke when he wasn't trying to sound casual.

Hannibal unpacked while he answered, “I thought you might enjoy something with an edge of familiarity.”

“But not too familiar?’ Will questioned, already knowing the answer.

“Familiarity is a blessing and a curse. It soothes and it dulls. It must be tempered by more unexpected elements,” Hannibal responded, removing multiple smaller containers from the cooler. Will thanked whatever god was willing to listen to him that Hannibal did not intend on cooking the entire meal from scratch in Will’s kitchen. “*Cioppino.* Fisherman’s Stew. A variety of fresh seafood served in a tomato and wine broth. Best served with lightly charred sourdough, rouille, and good company.”

Will appreciated the relative normalcy of the dish as much as Hannibal’s roundabout attempt at an homage to Will’s homecoming.

“I don’t think I can supply the last ingredient,” Will remarked.

“You’re quick to diminish yourself. You cannot accurately admire the gifts you have,” Hannibal stated as he poured a fragrant red sauce into a pot.

“I don’t need to admire my ‘gifts.’ Other people won’t stop telling me about them.”

Hannibal turned to slice the bread and continued without taking the bait, “There’s a Russian word that sometimes comes to mind when I think of you: *toska.* It’s not directly translatable, but the writer Vladimir Nabokov defined it rather broadly as anything from simple melancholy to ‘spiritual anguish.’ It’s what makes Russian literature beautiful.”

Will scoffed and said challengingly, “If my gift is anguish, maybe I should see a therapist.”

Hannibal finished carving through the final slice and looked at Will, the knife in his hand catching the overhead light in a gleam.

“Those who experience the furthest depths of pain have equal capacity to experience the sublime. Anguish, joy, violence, love-- the entire range of human emotion lies within your grasp. You need only the skill to discern which originate from Will Graham and which are reflections of strange faces.”

“Oh, that’s all? Thank you for the novel wisdom, Doctor,” Will sarcastically shot back.

“I can help you behold only yourself in the mirror. You might even come to like what you see. I do.”

Will exhaled deeply, not quite a sigh, and looked Hannibal in the eyes.

“Can we reserve this discussion for our next therapy session?”

A flash of regret crossed Hannibal’s face, but he easily responded, “Of course. I had no intention of delving into your psyche tonight.”

Although Will had doubts about the truth behind the statement, he accepted it as conciliatory. He set the small dining table placed against the wall in the kitchen, and he pulled out two bowls that were plain but matching and not chipped. The stew was soon finished, and Hannibal plated the meals-- blood red stew with white chunks of fish, shrimp, mussels, and possibly other buried meats. Each had a piece of crusty, toasted sourdough placed neatly to the side and a ramekin of the golden rouille. Will had no idea where the ramekins had come from, but it was a nice touch.

They sat at the table with a bottle of sparkling water between them. Will wondered with some glee how much Hannibal died inside when he realized he would have to forgo a wine pairing due to Will's regimen of medications. When the first bite touched Will's tongue, he closed his eyes reflexively; all prying and probing was forgiven in the hungry man's mind.

"This is wonderful."

Hannibal's pride flared, but he gave a restrained smile.

The mixture of creeping exhaustion and all-consuming hunger in Will's body led to a very quiet dinner. Hannibal talked briefly about the history of the dish and the difference between *cioppino* and *bouillabaisse*, but it was a one-sided conversation.

When the meal was finished, Will cleared the plates, and Hannibal sealed up the leftover stew in a blue container, which he stuck in Will's refrigerator. Will figured Hannibal had never eaten the same meal twice in a row in his adult life, so offering the extra to him was useless. Plus, the idea of having a second helping of the surprisingly hearty meal-- and not cooking lunch tomorrow-- had a certain selfish appeal.

"I'm afraid I can't linger this evening. You should rest, and I have a few notes I need to make about my session from this afternoon while the discussion is still fresh in my mind."

"Hannibal, you don't need to give an introvert an excuse when you leave," Will joked, in a better mood.

A small smile graced the older man's face as Will walked Hannibal to the door and held it open so that he could more easily pass with the cooler in his arms. When Hannibal had loaded the cooler back into his vehicle, Will gave a weak wave goodbye and retreated.

Will slept late into the next day. He woke feeling rested for the first time in months. Riding the high of a good night's sleep, he took the dogs on a long, meandering walk through the woods. Reunited with their human, the gang was in high spirits but didn't wander too far from him. Midday, Will reheated the leftover stew and bread; without an audience other than his pack, he made audible noises of appreciation sporadically throughout his meal. That was one satisfaction he would not give Hannibal Lecter; the man's ego would combust.

The evening followed a similar pattern to the previous day: Hannibal bribed the dogs with homemade treats and then retrieved a cooler filled with mysterious items from his car. Tonight's meal required a bit more preparation, though not too much. Hannibal made tandoori liver with jasmine rice and orange marmalade yogurt; he prepared the liver with spices at his own home but cooked it in one of Will's pans. He didn't comment on the pan's

age or possibly warped bottom. Conversation during cooking tracked back to the case they started working on in the hospital; Jack had called in the early evening to tell Will they were going to interview the man Hannibal and Will had suggested might be the perpetrator. Neither of them had heard anything further, which probably meant that Jack was busy-- a good sign. The dinner bordered on comfortable.

Will found the following days unfolding in a repeating cycle: Wake, walk the dogs, eat, shower, talk to Jack Crawford, take the dogs on a second walk, have dinner with Hannibal. By Thursday, Will felt a small sting of premature nostalgia, realizing the dinners would end the next day and he would return to a normal work life on Monday. The distraction would be nice, but he would miss the extended time with his dogs and the mental quiet the break had brought him. He would never admit it, but he thought he might miss the camaraderie he got a dose of every evening.

Hannibal arrived a bit earlier than usual, his last appointment canceling unexpectedly. With the extra time, he chose a dish best prepared and cooked in the same kitchen: roast pheasant with a medley of root vegetables and wild rice. It was rustic and uncomplicated-- a meal chosen with Will's tastes in mind. The table set and the pheasant still cooking, the men fell into conversation.

"Your experimentation with friendship-- how's it going?" Will inquired.

"I suppose the question would be better answered by you. Dr. Du Maurier would find your view of me riveting."

Will committed the last name to memory-- an actual person he could look into.

"Psychiatrists must get accustomed to unreliable narration. It might ruin the fun if a third party came in to sort fact from fiction," Will said thoughtfully.

"That's presuming there is fact and there is fiction. The truth is rarely so uninteresting," Hannibal asserted.

The words rambled around Will's mind, not finding a place to land easily.

"Tell me about your truth, then, Hannibal. *Friends* have to be able to trust one another. You know much more about me than I do about you. "

The man's eyes sparked with curiosity.

"What would you like to know, Will?"

"Let's start at the beginning. Where'd you grow up?"

"Lithuania."

"What kind of a home did you live in?"

"It would technically be considered a castle," Hannibal stated, anticipating the exasperated hand coming to Will's eyes before it happened. "I believe the term 'estate' is more apt."

“Oh, yes, an important distinction,” Will teased. “Parents? Siblings?”

Hannibal didn’t answer this question so quickly. He seemed to be considering his response.

“These are commonly considered the easy questions-- birthplace, childhood home, family-- the things you had no choice in. Sometimes those are the most difficult to explain.”

Will’s forehead wrinkled in interest and concern.

“My parents died when I was too young to live alone. Nevertheless, I tried. I cared for my younger sister, Mischa, for a time-- she needed a parent still. She was sweet, kind, gentle. Too gentle for the world she was born into.”

The image of Hannibal, young and too skinny, standing next to a little girl formed from the mist in Will’s mind.

“I loved her. She was killed.”

Hannibal was somewhere long ago and far away, a place with hounds and parents and a sister. Will went as far as he could with him, then stood mournfully at the gates, saddened for a man who had grown up too quickly, too harshly. Hannibal did not want Will’s sympathy, and Will struggled to not let it shine from his eyes. This wasn’t Will’s tragedy. He gave himself a moment of breathing to sort through which feelings were his and which were Hannibal’s; at the end, he was left with his own indefinable warmth toward the man standing in his kitchen.

“Thank you for telling me about Mischa, Hannibal.”

Hannibal launched back to the present at the words, but his expression was guarded now. His face pulled into an utterly blank mask, a canvas for others to paint their feelings onto. Will understood the attraction of hiding: It was one thing to follow your psychiatrist’s advice and play at making a friend; it was quite different to drag oneself along the jagged rocks of vulnerability and trust another not to pour salt into the open wounds.

Turning away from Will, Hannibal busied himself with tasks that were not necessary only a few minutes earlier. Even a relative cooking novice like Will could see through the flimsy charade; he let him go through the motions of working regardless. Hannibal regained control of himself before long, and he stepped away from the oven, placing his back against the counter again.

“You practiced what we’ve discussed-- recognizing your empathy and controlling for it,” Hannibal said at last. “You did very well.”

Will stood, the logical part of his brain processing the words while his mind impulsively directed him to approach Hannibal. He put a hand on the man’s arm; Hannibal’s eyes tracked down to watch it, tense suspicion narrowing his eyes. Before Will realized what he was doing, he was wrapping his arms around Hannibal in a hug; Hannibal froze under the touch. It was innocent and spontaneous; it was the hug one friend should give to another when

painful memories have been shared. Will Graham was not a hugger nor was Hannibal Lecter, yet Hannibal's hands eventually came up, awkwardly, to Will's back.

After a few seconds, Will broke away, mumbling an apology and meaningless words about boundaries that didn't ever apply to them.

"I think that was...appropriate," Hannibal concluded, cutting Will off. "We both live in our minds; sometimes the body is forgotten, to our detriment."

Will nodded, not agreeing so much as wishing the moment would be over smoothly and rapidly.

"I don't think I have any other questions," Will eventually said into the silent room. Hannibal smiled, breathed out a single laugh, and checked the oven thermometer.

As they ate dinner, Hannibal noticeably quieter than usual, Will wondered what the other man would tell Dr. Du Maurier about this night.

When the time came for Hannibal to leave, both found themselves loitering in the doorway. Will commented on the weather blandly, which led to a discussion of the paths around Will's home and the routes he and his dogs would take depending on the weather and time of day. Hannibal countered by describing how he would sometimes move the chairs in his office by just a few inches between patients to match the shifting light from his large window. This small talk constituted a peculiar hesitation to end the night. Will found himself wanting to know more about Hannibal's life and how he came to be the unusual man filling Will's table each evening; Will also felt residual sorrow at Hannibal's memories, making it difficult to send him out into the black of night.

The conversation hit a lull eventually, as was inevitable-- a clear signal to both that Hannibal needed to leave. He made it to the steps before halting and calling back out.

"Will," he spoke loudly, stopping the younger man, who had already closed his door halfway. Hannibal spoke firmly but without looking at Will when he said, "The experiment is going well. Thank you."

Will watched as Hannibal hurriedly got to his car and drove away, not looking back at the house or its occupant.

Chapter 5

The dogs chased one another in zigzag patterns around the yard as Will watched them from his porch. Buster's tiny legs moved at double speed in an attempt to catch Max; the larger dog gradually slowed his loping run, allowing himself to be overcome. There was something lovely about the six dogs-- different breeds, different temperaments, different origins-- coexisting together on a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.

Will's mind drifted to the night before. He replayed the conversation on a loop, starting with him asking Hannibal where he was from and ending at the point of contact. It felt right in the moment-- "appropriate," Hannibal had deemed it. As much as Will disliked being touched, he recognized the limitations of words. If Alana had been sharing those sharp-edged details with Will, it would have been difficult not to reach out to her, but Hannibal was different than Alana, and their friendship was different. Alana was glinting gold, something that might be shaped into a knowable form with enough care, whereas Hannibal was more akin to a block of marble, a figure hidden inside that could only be revealed by someone determined and skilled with a chisel.

The flowery image made Will laugh at himself; he was spending too much time with the doctor. He retrieved a book from inside the house and brought it outside to read in the autumn air. The dogs were having too much fun for him to call them back yet. Will had only just opened the book to where he'd stuck in a toothpick deemed worthy of being a bookmark when his phone rang: Alana Bloom, a spirit summoned by Will's internal ode.

"Hello?" he answered the call.

"Hey, stranger! How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, but all I've done this week is walk the dogs, sleep, and eat. Next week will be a better gauge."

"I'm glad to hear you're resting. You push yourself too hard sometimes...and Jack pushes you too hard most of the time."

Will didn't let the phone capture his sigh.

"I'm looking forward to being back. My brain feels too roomy without a few bodies stacked in the corner."

Alana was silent, no doubt worrying herself over Will's statement.

"Please take it easy."

"Did you call to remind me to take my medicine and get eight hours of sleep? Eat something green?"

“I get it. I’m stopping now. I was calling to see if you wanted to hang out this evening. Make dinner, watch a move-- I don’t know, a quiet night in.”

It was an unusual request from Alana. They walked the dogs together occasionally, but that was during the light of day. As soon as he wondered why she would suddenly be interested in passing a Friday night knocking around a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, the answer came: Hannibal had been unavailable all week; her companion of preference was out of reach. Will didn’t fault her for this-- it was natural to crave the company of some people over others, and she clearly had interest in the man beyond friendship. It was normal, but it also stung just a bit. It hurt less than Will anticipated, though; his mind had been too occupied by his waking life to wedge in daydreams about Alana Bloom.

“I’m busy.”

“That’s great-- I’m glad you’re not hiding from the world. What are you doing? Or is it a mystery?”

The words struggled to arrange themselves in Will’s mind. He hadn’t had to explain his nights with Hannibal to anyone yet, and he couldn’t discern the right approach. He could say Hannibal had continued bringing him dinner to let Will rest, but that was dishonest and easily picked apart. Still, saying that Hannibal made a multi-hour round trip drive every day because he and Will didn’t know how to interact like normal humans would open the door for questions Will couldn’t answer. He decided on being technically honest over totally honest.

“I’m having dinner with Hannibal.”

There was a pregnant pause. It made Will uneasy.

“You could ask to join. He loves an audience.”

Alana laughed, a welcome, tinny sound through the phone.

“He really does. I’ll give him a call, see if there’s room for one more.”

“I’ll see you at the dinner table.”

The call ended, and Will quickly typed out a message telling Hannibal to expect the call from Alana. It felt like a warning. Only minutes later, Hannibal’s name appeared as an incoming call.

“Will.” Hannibal’s version of a greeting. *“Dr. Bloom will be joining us this evening, as you know.”*

“Is it an inconvenience?”

“Alana indicated that she ambushed you. Cooking for three is not so different than cooking for two.”

Will translated that to mean it was an inconvenience but a forgivable one.

“Would it be rude of me to suggest we move to my home tonight? My menu will be altered.”

“Honestly, I’d be happy to see a new set of walls.”

Hannibal didn’t respond, and Will was stricken by the feeling he had something to apologize for, though he didn’t think it was as straightforward as apologizing for inviting Alana to the table. Few matters were straightforward when it came to Hannibal.

“Could you use my help? I can come early.”

“Come at 4. Goodbye, Will.”

The call disconnected, and Will sensed Hannibal had accepted the apology he didn’t offer.

At exactly 4:00 PM, Will rang Hannibal’s doorbell. The man greeted him in a navy blue suit, white shirt, and paisley-patterned tie; his silver pocket square added a pop of reflective sheen. He had come straight from his office, Will imagined.

“Will, good to see you.”

After the previous night’s closeness, it was a strangely pat greeting.

“Dr. Lecter,” Will greeted back, the name a gentle poke at the man’s formality.

Hannibal caught it, his eyes meeting Will’s, a trace of humor there. Hannibal stepped onto the doorstep and turned to lock the door behind him; Will watched with interest, wondering what the game was.

Hannibal answered the unasked question, “I’m going to teach you how to cook.”

Will raised his eyebrows, “Today? That’s too much confidence in my talents, even for you.”

One corner of Hannibal’s mouth tilted up in a crooked smile.

“Learning to properly cook requires a very long time. Learning how to properly cook a single dish is achievable in one day with a particularly adept pupil.”

Hannibal escorted him to the Bentley and drove away without further explanation. The unknown element of their impromptu field trip was interesting enough for Will not to ask about their destination. They parked on the street in front of an upscale grocery store, the name “Bartleby’s” painted in a swirling font across the large storefront window.

“We’re going grocery shopping?” Will questioned, amusement in his voice.

“Developing a discerning eye for raw materials is one of the first steps in creating art, second only to the acquisition of good taste.”

A slip of thick, ivory paper was offered to Will; on it was a list of ingredients written in Hannibal’s overly-ornate script. In the store, Will tried not to look at the prices as they perused the produce.

“Farmer’s markets are preferable, but Bartleby’s carries regional vegetables that are sometimes difficult to obtain in a timely manner,” Hannibal commented to a half-listening Will.

Hannibal was waxing poetic on choosing mushrooms when a voice called out a little too loudly, “Dr. Lecter!”

A stout man with dark hair and a short beard waved wildly and approached them with rapid steps. Will caught Hannibal’s look of utter disdain and his single, heaving breath, though by the time Lecter turned around, his face was stretched into tight neutrality.

“Franklyn,” he greeted. “Another unexpected meeting.”

“I knew it was you! What are the odds?” the man excitedly commented.

“Very slim.”

“I almost didn’t say anything, but I thought to myself, ‘If Dr. Lecter saw someone he knew looking at mushrooms, he would say hello,’ so here I am.”

“There you are.”

Will bit back a smile as he watched Franklyn’s exuberance ricochet off Hannibal’s icy shield.

“What brings you here? Looking for some more cheese?” Franklyn said it like it was an inside joke, but Hannibal remained impassive. The shorter man turned to Will and explained, “We both really like cheese. I’m Franklyn Froideveaux, by the way. I don’t know if Dr. Lecter has mentioned me. I’m one of his patients.” He held his hand out to Will. When Will proffered his own hand, it was met with a vigorous shake.

“He hasn’t, though I don’t know why,” Will glanced at Hannibal with thinly-veiled glee.

“I believe I mentioned previously it would be unethical to identify you as a patient. The principle has not changed.”

“Ethics,” Franklyn said with an exaggerated eye roll and laugh. “I didn’t catch your name?”

“Will Graham.”

“Will Graham,” Franklyn repeated, searching Will’s face. “Oh! I’ve seen you before!”

Will’s eyebrows lifted, prompting Franklyn to continue.

“You’re one of Dr. Lecter’s patients, too, aren’t you? You were outside the building one day when I was leaving.”

“Will is not my patient,” Hannibal firmly stated, inviting no argument.

“We’re friends,” Will clarified.

Franklyn's face seemed to drop at that.

"Oh, right. Dr. Lecter is a hard man to become friends with. Believe me, I've tried," he said with the defeat of a kicked puppy. "What's the secret?" he asked jokingly, though Will could see it wasn't exactly a joke for Mr. Froideveaux.

"Persistence," Will answered without hesitation, causing Hannibal's head to swiftly turn toward him, though his expression stayed ostensibly pleasant. Franklyn appeared heartened by Will's advice.

"Franklyn, we must save some curiosity for our next appointment. I'm afraid I also must hurry-- I have much to do."

Franklyn nodded, laughed nervously again, and said, "Well, it was nice meeting you, Mr. Graham. And Dr. Lecter, our chance encounters are always delightful."

Hannibal didn't answer. After a moment of awkward silence, Franklyn left, casting a final glance and wave back over his shoulder.

Will would have sworn he heard Hannibal whisper "Persistence" under his breath as he put the mushrooms in the burlap tote and moved purposefully to find the next item on the list, Will staying a few feet behind.

In Hannibal's kitchen, the man expertly demonstrated how to dice the mushrooms, spinach, tomato, dried bread, and garlic; he prepared half of each and then handed the knives over to Will to finish. He made it look so much easier than it was. Will's garlic mincing was atrocious.

"Go slowly, Will. It's more important for the cuts to be precise than quick."

Will slowed his hands and strove for cleaner, neater slices.

"Very good," Hannibal commented and turned to the veal.

When Will finished with the vegetables, Hannibal showed him the cuts he had made into the meat, creating a heavily salted pocket for the stuffing. He then melted butter in a saute pan and directed Will to add the ingredients in specific quantities. After being partially cooked, the vegetables and breadcrumbs were transferred to a large bowl, and Hannibal guided Will through seasoning the mixture. Once the roast was stuffed and in the oven, Hannibal began composing a vibrant sauce made of pureed raspberry, orange rind, port, macerated currants, and cayenne pepper. He mentioned the amounts of each ingredient but emphasized to Will that color and smell should dictate the exact amount of citrus and cayenne needed.

As the roast finished cooking, they cleaned the kitchen, Will doing the dishes and Hannibal scrubbing the surfaces until there was no sign anyone had ever touched the stovetop or island. They completed their work only a few minutes before Alana was set to arrive and fifteen minutes before the veal needed to be checked.

"That was...fun," Will remarked, thinking once more about how troublesome words were.

“I dabble in the concept,” Hannibal replied. “What kind of water would you like?”

Will did not know how to answer that question.

“Cold. Wet. What are the other options?”

Hannibal led him to the small chamber where wine was stored and pointed to a space on the shelf devoted to different waters. The bottles came in a variety of dark colors and had overly artistic labels; Will wondered where these had even been purchased from.

Hannibal launched into an explanation: “Chefs and bakers alike have to account for the water they use when cooking. Too much calcium and magnesium--”

“Hard water,” Will supplied.

“--results in toughened plants. Too little calcium, gluten doesn’t form easily. Then there are taste considerations. Limestone can impart a mineral flavor; seasonal algae blooms and decomposing plant matter add their own character.”

“I didn’t realize water sommeliers existed. Maybe you’re the first.”

“Far from it, I assure you,” Hannibal gently corrected.

“I’ll choose limestone over algae.”

Hannibal lifted a dark green glass bottle from the shelf and put it in the refrigerator to chill for a few minutes, though he noted water-- like wine-- should not be served *too* cold or the flavor would be dulled.

Alana arrived soon after Will’s unexpected lesson on water selection, and Hannibal poured her one of his “private reserve” beers. They stood around the island, chatting comfortably about Alana’s lectures in Will’s classes and how Will’s recovery was progressing. Hannibal pulled the roast from the oven but required that it rest for fifteen minutes before carving; the smell stimulated their hunger, the three taking deep inhales of the savory scent.

“I can’t tell what the note is that I’m tasting,” Alana remarked after an appreciative sip of her beer. She studied the glass, hoping to see the answer etched somewhere in the suds. “There’s the hops and the oak, but that final smoothness...my palate must need more refining.”

“It has come a long way already,” Hannibal said, not as a criticism. “Will’s has as well. He deserves at least equal thanks for tonight’s entree.”

“Were you the sous chef this evening?” she inquired with a smile.

Hannibal interjected, “Will was promoted to co-executive chef for the evening.”

Alana kept the smile on her face, but Will saw something in her eyes that toed the line between inquisitive and concerned.

“I don’t think you have any competition to worry about, Hannibal,” Will commented.

“When it comes to cooking, I find harmony more desirable than competition,” Hannibal replied. Then, holding up an impossibly sharp knife, he announced, “Time to eat.”

Hannibal plated the dishes in the kitchen, but Will and Alana each took their own plate to the dining table, a symbol of the casualness of the evening more than a necessity. Will drank his not-too-cold mineral water from a stemless wine glass and felt a surge of accomplishment when he took the first bite of the veal. He thought he understood better now how cooking had become something like an addiction for Hannibal. The ritual, the care, the creativity, the investment-- all working toward the creation of a beautiful final product.

“Fantastic,” Alana complimented, aimed at both of them.

Will and Hannibal exchanged a brief look of shared pride.

“Hannibal, I didn’t ask you how your week was,” Alana resumed their earlier idle conversation. “I hope you didn’t miss cooking for a group too much.”

Not for the first time that evening, a beat of silence passed wherein Alana felt like she was missing a page of the book the other two were reading from.

“I didn’t,” Hannibal began, carefully selecting his words. “Will was gracious enough to allow me to prepare dinners for him.”

Will took a noticeably long sip of water, half-hoping to drown.

Alana glanced at Will, then back to Hannibal.

“Every night? It’s a long trip to Wolf Trap. That’s so generous of you,” she praised, not sounding especially impressed.

“What are friends for?” Hannibal intoned and continued eating, not an iota of tension visible in his body.

“I didn’t realize you two had become so...close,” she struggled to choose how to end her statement. “It’s great to see you letting people in, Will.”

Alana’s genuine tone suggested she didn’t realize how patronizing the comment could be.

“A person, not people,” Will corrected, feeling chagrined by the previous observation. “I have a reputation as a recluse to maintain,” he added more jokingly.

They ate in silence for a few moments, Alana clearly trying to wrap her mind around the concept of the two men having nightly dinners. Will couldn’t say he blamed her; it was objectively unusual and specifically odd for the duo in question. Yet, when Hannibal and Will sat down at Will’s small kitchen table and talked about murderers or Lithuanian hounds or lures, the world felt a little less lonely. Not only did Will perceive this idea as astonishingly difficult to communicate accurately, but he also recoiled at the notion of explaining it to anyone at all. To the same degree Will winced thinking about someone in his home while he was in the hospital, he blanched imagining a third party prying into his and Hannibal’s tentative attachment to one another.

“Alana,” Hannibal broke the silence, “I’ve attempted to influence Will enough that he will agree to attend an opera performance. You’ve been and seemed to have an enjoyable experience-- maybe you can prove more convincing.”

Will saw Alana’s jaw work behind her closed mouth. She laid her cutlery down and leaned back in her chair. Will had seen this face before in Jack’s office, though he wasn’t the recipient then-- she was readying herself to say something biting yet essentially true.

“I have to question your judgment, Hannibal.”

He looked at her, intrigued.

“Not a fan of the opera, then?” he smiled.

She sighed, frustration emerging.

“I can’t think of a way to say this delicately: There are reasons we don’t socialize with patients.”

“Will isn’t a patient,” Hannibal recited.

“There’s at least one document in his file that would say otherwise.”

“Will had a psychological assessment to return to field work. This preceded any friendship, and he has not been a patient since.”

Alana glared at that statement. She shot back, “That’s a loophole at best. You still see each other regularly for appointments, in your office no less.”

“If that is the sticking point, we will move our weekly conversations to a more homey atmosphere,” Hannibal returned, nonchalant in the face of Alana’s growing upset.

“You know that’s not the point.”

Will felt his face getting hot when he said, “Alana, are you implying I am so easily manipulated that I could not freely choose to befriend someone after a single psych evaluation?”

Alana looked at Will, not guilty but something close to it.

“Will, you know that’s not what I mean. It’s a delicate relationship between a psychiatrist and a patient. This type of...intimacy is not ordinary for either of you. Sometimes lines blur without us realizing.”

The woman wasn’t wrong in theory, but Will couldn’t help bristling at the comments.

He steadied his voice as he spoke, “If you trust me to make my own decisions, you’ll trust me to know where those lines are. Don’t concern yourself with problems that aren’t yours.”

She looked hurt at that, the redness in her cheeks lessening while her eyes saddened. Will was known for being brusque at times, but he had not used the tone with Alana.

“Okay,” she conceded, not sounding at all convinced. “You’re adults. I’ve made my thoughts known.”

“Your concern is noted and appreciated, Alana. As always, I respect your opinion, even if I disagree,” Hannibal said placidly. Will thought it was the most courteous way he’d ever heard someone say they were going to do exactly as they pleased. He took a sip of wine and asked brightly, “Did you hear that Jack apprehended our murderer of the elderly?”

Murder was a safe topic for the trio, and they clung to it for the rest of the evening.

Chapter 6

Douglas Wilson's body sat posed on the stage, his throat opened and the neck of a cello jammed through his mouth. It was a hell of a way for Will Graham to be welcomed back after his convalescence. Jack Crawford told him the limited details of the case thus far: The man was a trombone player in the Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra, and he was killed at some point after his Saturday night performance by blunt force trauma to the back of the head.

As Will took in the haunting scene, Jack lingered nearby on the stage, trying to read his mind.

"Any ideas?"

"Feelings precede ideas," Will said simply, taking a few steps closer to Mr. Wilson's body.

Crawford stood back in silence for a few minutes more, waiting for Will's cue to leave.

"Maybe the time away wasn't a bad thing. It's getting easier for you to look," Jack observed.

"My mind is clearer now. I'm creating stronger walls between my own thoughts and the thoughts I'm borrowing. Trying to, at least."

"Letting Dr. Lecter help you with that?" Jack questioned.

Will's eyes didn't leave the body as he replied, "I let him disapprove of me when the walls crumble."

Jack huffed a single, dry laugh and responded, "Good. We need you." He stood by Will a moment longer, failing to see what the other man could. "Take your time. I'll come back in when you tell me."

The officers cleared out, and Will and Mr. Wilson were left alone together at last, the secrets spilling eagerly from the dead man in the silence of the music hall. Will saw the event unfold in his mind: *A deficient trombonist is killed swiftly, the importance being what materials he can provide, not the anatomical details of his death. The killer, a craftsman, prepares him and tries to play him like a cello. As in a performance, the focus is to be on the musician, not the instrument. He wants his song of death to be heard.*

Coming back to the present, Will called Jack in and explained his vision. Beverly Katz confirmed the powdery residue on Wilson's throat was rosin, evidence someone had attempted to play the corpse.

"Nice work, Will. We'll meet you back at the lab this afternoon. It's good to have you back," Jack finished with a pat on the shoulder.

Walking to his car, Will began the slow, imperfect process of filtering his thoughts from the killer's. In the vehicle, he spoke aloud to himself, repeating a grounding exercise: "My name is Will Graham. I am in Baltimore, Maryland. It is 8:34 AM. I woke up this morning in Wolf

Trap, Virginia. I have six dogs. Their names are Max, Jack, Harley, Winston, Buster, and Ellie…"

Will continued reciting facts, recovering his own feelings-- joy at seeing his dogs, annoyance at a case being tossed into his lap before his alarm even went off, concern about his students not being prepared for the final-- and letting the egotistical outrage of the musician's killer fade into background noise. By the time he was at Quantico, he had made no grand revelation about the killer's identity, but he felt less anxious than usual during the hours immediately following a vision of a crime scene.

His 10:00 AM class wasn't especially enthused to see the return of Professor Graham and the departure of Dr. Bloom, but Will was relieved to find they had not gotten too far off of the syllabus during his two-week absence. He assigned them two cases to analyze instead of one to get them caught up; they only grumbled after they were out the classroom door.

In the lab that afternoon, Beverly, Price, Zeller, Jack, and Will stood around the body as the team reported their findings.

"Along with rosin powder, we found sodium carbonate, sulfur dioxide, lye, and olive oil in the wounds," Beverly explained. "The cords were treated with a sulfur dioxide solution that hardened them."

"Made them easier to play," Will inferred.

Beverly nodded a confirmation. She went on, "Maybe it's a warning. If you can't play your instrument, he'll turn you into a better one."

"He also whitened the vocal cords," Zeller added.

"He's treating the vocal cords the same way you'd treat catgut string," Beverly concluded, then quickly noted, "And yes, I played the violin."

"Were there recitals?" Price asked, hope in his voice.

"I burned the tapes after my first autopsy," Beverly retorted without missing a beat.

"Point taken," Price said, going back to studying the clipboard in his hands.

"We should be looking at musicians, people who make instruments. Cross that with people who had a ticket to his last show," Will stated. He looked at the artistry of the work and continued, "This required confidence and a steady hand. It isn't his first kill. His first kill like this, yes, but he's acquainted with death."

Price and Zeller shot each other quick looks-- looks Will accurately interpreted to mean they both thought he would end up behind bars one day. Meanwhile, Beverly listened to him intently, absorbing his words.

"Have I mentioned how glad I am you're back, Graham?" she remarked with a smile.

Will gave her a half-grin, one that was sincere but couldn't reach his eyes.

The next day, Will continued torturing his students for their benefit. Every question missed now would be one less mistake on the final or, more importantly, in the field. When Will was packing up after his last class, Jack Crawford appeared in his doorway. The tension in his shoulders and intense expression made him seem twice the size he normally was; Jack had a way of filling the room when his anger boiled over. Will forced himself to continue putting his files into his bag. He would not be pushed around by the fuming agent and his whims.

“Will, I need to see you in my office. Now.” He didn’t offer a chance to respond before disappearing into the hall.

In a small act of rebellion, Will finished cleaning up his desk before following behind in Jack’s wake.

When Will entered the office, he was taken aback to see Freddie Lounds and Hannibal already seated in front of Jack’s desk. Will locked the door behind him without being asked. He realized Jack’s ire was directed at Freddie, not him.

“Ms. Lounds, would you like to explain why we’re having this meeting?” Jack ground out through a clenched jaw.

Freddie, as always, sat in a cloud of gleeful insolence. She handed Will, who had not sat down, a bright red folder. Inside was a printed mock-up of a TattleCrime front page. The headline screamed, “Making Housecalls?” The subtitle underneath in bold font read, “Inside Graham’s nightly visits with psychiatrist hired by FBI.”

Dots of black colored Will’s field of vision. He handed Hannibal the file without speaking.

“Very creative, Ms. Lounds. Your career in fiction is promising,” Hannibal commented after scanning the page coolly and snapping the folder shut.

“This isn’t fiction. It’s speculation. There’s a difference,” Freddie lilted with a smile.

“Using the word ‘allegedly’ doesn’t make it journalism,” Will snapped.

“It does in the eyes of the law,” Freddie chirped back. “The article in the folder isn’t published. There will be a story about you, Mr. Graham, but it doesn’t have to be this one.”

Will stared at her but didn’t truly see her when he asked, “Are you trying to blackmail me?”

Freddie tsked at the word. “Don’t be ridiculous. My readers want the story with the most reliable details, and when it comes to our public servants, they deserve to know the truth. So, they can either read this story-- which I’ll admit is a little bit lacking-- or they can read about your encephalitis. Of course, the story about your illness only really works if you answer a few questions for me.”

Will’s mouth fell open just a bit, and he looked at Jack incredulously. Crawford leaned back in his leather chair and shook his head.

“You know exactly what I think of this, Will, and I’m sorry you’re in this position. It’s up to you-- I can’t stop her from publishing either story.”

“But one of them is a fabrication!” Will shouted, pointing to the red folder.

“If I report that Dr. Lecter has been paying you nightly visits for the past week, that is the truth. It’s also true if I write that he was responsible for a psychological assessment that has been used to justify your return to fieldwork. My readers can draw whatever conclusions they want from those facts,” Freddie asserted.

“The headline alone is incendiary,” Will growled.

“There’s a question mark,” Freddie pointed out.

Will rubbed his face and tried to push down the heat that was rising within him. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at Hannibal, who recognized the cue to speak.

“I am not Will Graham’s psychiatrist. As far as I’m concerned, you may publish either story. If there is a falsehood, our attorneys can debate libel.” Hannibal remained utterly untouched by the entire situation, legs casually crossed and arms resting loosely on the chair.

Jack and Freddie looked back at Will. He made up his mind and took a step toward Freddie instinctively, wanting her to feel some of the emotion she was spreading.

“Five minutes. Factual questions only.”

Freddie smiled at him, lighting the flame of his fury anew. She gestured toward the red folder in Hannibal’s lap and said, “You can keep that. Thank you for your time, Agent Crawford. Mr. Graham, I’ll call you this evening. We’re not having this discussion here.”

Freddie glided out of the room without further comment. Jack exhaled an angry sigh as soon as the door closed behind her..

“I think you made the right choice, for what it’s worth. An illness you can’t control is a better story for you--”

for the BAU

“--than an affair with the doctor who cleared you.”

“Jack, either way, she’s going to say that I’m crazy. I’m either unfit because I was sick or I’m unfit because I seduced my psychiatrist,” Will pleaded, feeling like he was speaking to an empty audience.

“And in both scenarios, I would have to ask for your gun,” Jack said, speaking into the corner of the room instead of to Will’s face. “It’s only a symbolic gesture. We hold your gun until you get a few more check-ups in with your neurologist, and then we can go back to normal.”

Indignant, Will harshly pulled the gun from its holster, put the weapon on Jack’s desk with a sharp smack, and stormed out of the office. He didn’t need to go back to his classroom for anything, but he had too much unspent rage in him to get behind the wheel of his car just yet. In the classroom, Will paced around the lecture space, hands in his hair. He pictured playing Freddie Lounds like a shrill violin.

A few minutes later, Will was no more calm, and he almost pounced when he heard the door open. Hannibal entered the room and pulled the door tight behind him.

“This is unbelievable,” Will ranted. “She was watching my house. She was watching *us*. How many lives does she have to ruin? I wish…,” he trailed off, knowing what his wish was but not willing to voice it. Hannibal watched him with anticipation but didn’t ask him to finish his thought.

“Our lives will hardly be ruined by a suggestive article. It will be sensational for a day and then forgotten.”

Hannibal’s calm presence alternatingly enraged Will and brought him back down to earth.

“It would jeopardize your career more than mine,” Will pointed out.

Hannibal considered the statement for a moment and then answered, “This hardly meets the bar for professional censure. My clients would pay it no mind, and if they did, there are always new patients in need of assistance.”

Will stopped pacing and looked Hannibal in the eyes.

“She’ll run the encephalitis story eventually anyway.”

Hannibal cocked his head to the side and replied, “If she had enough information about your illness, she wouldn’t have come here today. It suggests her information is flimsy at best.” Hannibal’s unworried gaze held Will’s outraged one as he said, “She doesn’t deserve to know what’s in your mind. You don’t owe it to her, and I wouldn’t ask it of you.”

Some of the adrenaline plummeting, Will collapsed into a chair by his desk.

“She doesn’t deserve to know about our relationship either. It’s not hers to dissect.”

Hannibal came to sit in the chair next to Will, sensing the younger man’s anger had reached its apex and was now making its descent.

“Your choice to make. You have until this evening to decide. But Will, don’t concern yourself with me-- you already worry too much.”

Will glanced at him and gave a partially sardonic, partially sincere smile.

“Do you ever worry about anything?” Will asked.

He watched Hannibal consider the question and devote too much time to formulating a response. Will imagined Hannibal running through an alphabetized checklist of all of the things in life he didn’t worry about.

“You know what, don’t answer that,” Will finally cut off his thoughts, slumping further into the seat.

Hannibal put a hand on Will's shoulder, gripped it firmly, and said, "Tomorrow, the sun will rise no matter what Freddie Lounds publishes." With a squeeze, he added, "Let's meet at my house for our appointment. I'll make dinner and try to shoulder some of your misery, regardless of the article you choose."

Will nodded and felt the muscles in his chest and stomach begin to relax. Perhaps Hannibal had magically imparted some of his calm with the touch of his hand, or, more likely, his presence had come to help soothe Will's frequently frayed nerves. After a week's worth of hospital visits, two weeks of preparing meals, and at least a dozen weekly meetings before that, the association between the man and tranquility would be logical.

Hannibal got up to leave, with a final request that Will let him know after his conversation with Freddie. Will agreed, and when Hannibal was gone, he leaned his head back over the top of the chair and wondered where he had gone wrong in life to land in his current position.

That night, Will poured himself a glass of whiskey that bordered on excessive in spite of his medications and sat on his front porch. He left the dogs inside, a part of him feeling as though they didn't need to hear this conversation. He called Freddie's cell phone number and was irritated when it went to voicemail. He waited a few minutes and tried again. Over the course of the next two hours, he tried calling her eight times and sent her three text messages. At 10:30 PM, Will figured that Freddie would know how to find him if she needed to. He was tired and in the gray zone between warm and intoxicated. He went to bed, phone plugged in within arm's reach.

The next morning, a headache pushing behind his eyes from the alcohol, Will found no new calls, voicemails, or text messages. More surprisingly, when he checked the TattleCrime homepage, the only article published that related to him at all was a short piece alluding to a mysterious hospital stay. An article like that would get a few clicks, but it lacked any details or salacious information. The worst quote was from an anonymous nurse who said that he had been having severe headaches which could, theoretically, impact quality of work. For Freddie Lounds, it may as well have been a fluff piece.

Confused, Will stopped by Jack's office on his way to his afternoon class, hoping the agent could elucidate why Freddie had a sudden change of heart. Jack told Will he'd been surprised, too, as he hadn't heard from her; Jack also wondered if Hannibal's libel comment had made more of an impact than they'd thought. He said that if she hadn't posted anything worse in 48 hours, they could talk about Will having his gun back.

Will refreshed the website obsessively throughout the day. Two new articles appeared-- one on the cello murder and one on a newly-graduated FBI agent who was supposedly arrested for possession as a juvenile. By the time Will made it to Hannibal's house, he was cautiously optimistic.

As soon as he opened the door, the rich smell of cooking meat filled his senses. He entered the kitchen and curiously nosed around the mostly-finished meal. It was a pork loin, beautifully cooked, served with a ginger sauce and asparagus. Fresh bread was being taken out of the oven. Will had only eaten a drive-through breakfast sandwich that morning to soak up the remaining alcohol, but he tried not to look like a starving stray.

“Will,” Hannibal smiled, seeming to be in a particularly good mood. “The sky has not fallen yet.”

Will smiled back, letting himself feel total relief for a few peaceful minutes.

“Maybe you were right-- she was bluffing. The article about me being in the hospital was... meaningless,” Will said, shaking his head, still confused. Jack’s earlier statement came back to him, and he inquired, “Did you end up mentioning the meeting to your attorney?”

Hannibal cocked his eyebrows up slightly when he answered, “I ran it by him. It’s possible he gave a verbal warning without my solicitation. I’d rather believe Ms. Lounds has bettered herself.”

Will scoffed, “She would eat her young for another ad deal. I trust your lawyer more than her.”

Hannibal gave another genuine smile, the edges of his teeth peeking through his lips.

“Enough of Ms. Lounds. She has consumed too much of our lives already this week. Her time is over. Would you mind setting the table?”

Will laid out the cutlery and white china carefully. He tried to borrow a strategy from Hannibal’s playbook and let go of all thoughts of Freddie. Whatever the reason for scrapping-- or just delaying-- the article, the outcome was the same.

With this in mind, as Will savored the tender pork loin that evening, he did not permit Freddie Lounds to join him at the table set for two.

Chapter 7

After placing a new log on the fire, Will brushed his hands together and took a seat on Hannibal's living room sofa. The wood crackled softly as the flames charged to dance upon its surface. For a short time, the room was not a space in a Baltimore home; it was a cabin at the end of the world, untouched by the BAU, Freddie Lounds, or death. This vague dream still floated in Will's consciousness when Hannibal returned with two small dessert plates.

"Apple rose tarts with tonka bean mousse," he announced.

Will glanced up and accepted the plate, commenting, "Tonka beans are illegal in the United States."

"I'll have to trust you won't report me to Jack Crawford," Hannibal replied with an unworried expression.

The sharpness of the tart and vanillic sweetness of the mousse mingled deliciously in Will's mouth, an approving noise escaping him before he could catch himself.

Hannibal looked smug yet not unkind; Will shot him a dirty look but took another bite anyway.

"Tell me, Will, have you been called upon to return to the field? Uncle Jack won't let you lock yourself away in the classroom for long."

The image of Douglas Wilson seated on the stage, cello neck protruding skyward from his mouth, materialized behind Will's eyes. He looked back at the fire as he spoke, "I didn't even make it to the classroom before he called."

"The trombonist from the orchestra?"

It had been all over the news, and considering the location, it was no surprise Hannibal was aware of the case.

Will nodded and elaborated, "Douglas Wilson was turned into a cello. The killer attempted to play his vocal cords with a bow. He made an instrument so we all could hear his song." Details hung in the air unspoken, Hannibal clever enough to fill in the gaps for himself. "Were you familiar with Wilson?"

Hannibal's dark eyes glowed amber in the firelight. Will waited, curious what insights he might offer.

"I knew of him. I often attend orchestra performances. We weren't acquaintances, though."

Will asked bluntly, "Was he good?"

Hannibal gave Will a sidelong glance and answered, “Not particularly, though his playing didn’t sink to the level of offense.” He took a bite of the dessert, and Will mirrored the action, allowing a few moments of quiet to spread between them. “Do you believe this fact influenced Mr. Wilson’s murderer?”

“Maybe,” Will responded truthfully. “A more *altruistic* murderer might kill Douglas to allow the orchestra to play more beautifully. This killer is arrogant-- he transformed Wilson to celebrate his own craftsmanship. He failed, so he’ll try again.”

“A true patron of the arts,” Hannibal flatly observed. His voice became inquisitive as he queried, “Will, were you able to leave Mr. Wilson and his benefactor at the music hall, or did they follow you home?”

“No unexpected visitors,” Will said as he stood up, put down his empty dessert plate, and started moving around the room, looking at the oddities that comprised the decor.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Hannibal sounded sincerely pleased with this news. “Did you use your grounding exercises?”

Will nodded. He paused at the window and pushed aside a long, velvety drape to look outside.

“The killer left me a parting gift, though,” he said, feeling himself tensing from the memory.

Hannibal turned to watch him, waiting for him to finish.

“After the meeting with Freddie Lounds, I was so angry. I wanted her to die,” Will recalled numbly.

“You wanted her to die, or you wanted to kill her?”

Will kept his gaze focused on some unknown point out the window as he said evenly, “I wanted to see what she’d look like as an instrument. I wanted to hear the sound her body would make if I ran a bow against it.” Will swallowed hard, then went on, “It was only there for a few seconds.”

“It still is,” Hannibal noted. “How did you feel when you imagined transforming Ms. Lounds?”

Will spoke just above a whisper as he replied, “Powerful. Righteous.”

“Just as when you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs?” Hannibal pushed, expressionless.

“Yes,” Will exhaled. He walked back to the mantle to let the fire warm him. Hannibal’s eyes followed his movement.

“The impulse to kill is a natural one. Our bodies prepare us chemically to defend ourselves in moments of stress; Freddie Lounds posed a threat to you, and your body reacted accordingly,” Hannibal reassured in the tone of a therapist. He licked his bottom lip and lifted

his stare to burn through the back of Will's head. "Your desire to kill isn't what troubles you-- it is the shame you cling to when you recognize you do not feel guilty for it."

Will's head snapped to look at Hannibal, his eyes wider than they had been seconds earlier and his brow furrowed.

"That's a dangerous thought," Will said, staring back into Hannibal's intense eyes.

"Not for you," the man on the sofa immediately responded. "When you unchain yourself from the expectations placed on you, you will find who you are meant to be."

"Are you advising I *just be myself*? A little bit trite for you," Will sneered.

One side of Hannibal's mouth rose in a close-lipped, crooked smile at the verbal swing, and he looked back into the fire.

"Allow your mind the freedom to entertain even those ideas you would not make reality. By doing so, you will reserve your penitence for that which you truly regret."

Will's shoulders rose and fell in a deep breath, and he returned to sit on the opposite end of the sofa. The slump in his back hinted at weariness.

"Let's return to the man who inspired your vivid plans for Ms. Lounds. Who is he?"

Will's brow raised as he recalled the profile he began, "This isn't his first experience with death, but the earlier murders will be too different for us to identify as his. He will attend Baltimore Metropolitan Orchestra concerts regularly. Probably works with instruments, either playing them or restoring them. He won't hide his talents." Will reflected on his own words, then asked, "Ring any bells?"

The other man's eyes drifted to the impala head mounted above the mantle, considering the question.

"It's not a thought I've entertained. I rarely find myself scrutinizing the audience-- an oversight on my part, perhaps. It may prove worthwhile to attend a performance yourself," Hannibal suggested.

A sound of dismissal came from Will's side of the couch. The idea was technically not a bad one, but Will pictured himself suffocated in a sea of Cal Barnett dopplegangers. He caught a glimpse of humor in Hannibal's expression at Will's obvious distaste for the idea.

"Music is a sort of alchemy. Man applies breath and force to raw materials, and emotion miraculously emerges as the product. The listener then further distills this emotion according to his own nature. I suspect your mind would create a singularly exceptional compound."

Will sat forward, elbows on knees. It was a lovely thought, but it wasn't true for him.

"My mind rarely manufactures emotions as intended," he finally replied, more somber than defiant.

“Only as measured by the intentions of others. Your mind works perfectly, Will,” Hannibal affirmed.

The statement dove deep into Will’s brain, imprinting itself before it could be rejected. Will couldn’t recall the sentiment having been expressed to him at any point in his life; even now that his unique thinking was considered an asset, it was with the understanding that his storied brokenness was part of the package. His mind summoned the unbidden memory of making his aunt cry at his grandmother’s funeral when he reconstructed what her death by heart attack must have looked like; he was seven and already too observant, too curious, too sharp. Will tried not to let these thoughts play out across his face; Hannibal’s remark was essentially just a nice thing for a good friend to say. The man couldn’t have known it would be absorbed so hungrily.

Hannibal turned toward Will on the sofa, watching his face. Will remained silent until the memories passed.

“Come with me,” Hannibal said finally. Will looked at him, confused. “I have tickets to a performance Saturday afternoon at your killer’s preferred venue. It would save you the horror of attending alone, and I’d enjoy the company.”

Eyes fixed on the flames, Will dismissed the idea, “Invite Alana. She’d appreciate it, and she’s good at events like that. She can handle people.”

“Alana can manage people,” Hannibal asserted. “You both *handle* people equally well.” Will smirked, recalling his first biting meeting with Hannibal in Jack’s office. Hannibal went on insistently, “And I’d prefer your company. I can never quite predict how you will respond to something new.”

The last statement sounded like a compliment coming from Hannibal, but Will couldn’t be sure. He decided to avoid engaging with it-- too tired now-- and lightened the tone instead.

“Has Dr. Du Maurier deemed your experiment in friendship a success?” Will taunted.

“Dr. Du Maurier hasn’t decided what to make of our outcome yet. The unknowable nature of the heart confounds even psychiatrists.”

It was difficult to imagine Hannibal baring his soul to the striking woman Will had found a picture of online; then again, it was equally challenging to imagine the elegant woman killing a patient in self-defense as multiple articles indicated. Will wondered if Hannibal realized he had chosen two murderers as confidantes.

“Saturday?” Will sighed. Hannibal nodded. “I guess. I need to talk to Jack first, though. Freddie Lounds has to be sniffing around somewhere.”

With little else to say and Will stifling a yawn, Hannibal sent him home.

During the few remaining days in the week, Will divided his non-teaching time between hitting the refresh button on the TattleCrime homepage and avoiding Jack. A few more articles appeared, though the pace had slowed; usually when Freddie started posting less, it meant she was on a mission to destroy someone's life with a carefully constructed barrage of investigative pieces. So far, though, no more of the articles she had posted mentioned Will or Hannibal. Spurred on by this fact, on Friday afternoon, Will finally mustered the energy to talk to Jack.

The bigger man was standing in front of his desk flipping through a thick manilla folder when Will knocked on the open door.

"Will, come in," Jack greeted, as pleasantly as he could.

"Do you have a minute?" Will asked.

To Jack's credit, he didn't look exasperated when he said, "Close the door behind you."

Will sat down in one of the chairs by Jack, consciously keeping his body relaxed. Jack tended to mirror and amplify body language, so Will reasoned that if he stayed calm, Jack would also. Admittedly, it was only a working theory.

"What's on your mind?' Agent Crawford questioned.

"I wanted to touch base. I still haven't heard from Freddie Lounds," Will led with the good news.

"Me neither. She can publish as many stories about the BSO murderer as she wants as long as she keeps our names out of it."

Will agreed with a nod, then continued, "Speaking of the trombonist killer, I bounced some of my ideas for the profile off of Hannibal. I think it would be a good idea for me to go to one of the shows this weekend to scope out the crowd."

"Not a bad idea. I might even like it," Jack responded.

"Hannibal has an extra ticket."

Will watched Jack's face and body; his arms stiffened, fingers pressing ever so slightly more firmly against the file in his hands, but his face only assumed a mask of neutrality. He sighed, a tired sound.

"Will, listen, I believe Dr. Lecter has helped you, both as a therapist and as a friend. I also believe his assessment of you was fair and accurate. However, I worry about Freddie Lounds. It's only been a few days." Jack kept his tone even, and he searched Will's face for some sign of mutual understanding.

"I agree," Will answered, "and this is a problem that won't go away. Freddie demonstrated how any reporter can dig until they find some piece of evidence *proving* I'm unstable. I can't help the encephalitis or that I had to kill Garrett Jacob Hobbs." Will paused, wanting to be

sure he meant what he was about to say. “But I can be cleared for field work by another psychiatrist, and that would protect me, you, and the BAU.”

Jack put the folder down and looked at Will as skepticism and gratitude battled for control of his expression.

“You seemed fairly determined to shoot down that option before. Why are you taking it now?”

Will looked past Jack’s head at the wall and suppressed the urge to defensively cross his arms over his chest as he said, “I think I can help you save lives. If I get cleared once by an irreproachable third party, I never have to do it again. I *will* never do it again.”

“You can survive anything once,” Jack intoned.

“I’ve felt better the past few weeks than I have…,” Will trailed off, running a hand through his hair as he thought back, “...honestly, than I have in years. Now’s the time.”

Crawford gave him a long, approving stare, eyes warm. There was friendly affection in his voice when he said, “I’m proud of you, Will. Keep it up.”

Will only nodded in return, touched by the words but annoyed he had to jump through hoops to earn them.

Businesslike again, Jack stood up and stated, “I’ll start making calls today. We’ll fast-track the assessment-- get it done next week and never look back. You’ll get your gun as soon as we have a doctor’s signature.”

Will stood, and as he was leaving, he reassured Jack, “If I find anything this weekend, I’ll let you know.”

Jack tipped his head in thanks.

That evening, sitting on his porch with his family of dogs, Will felt warm even in the rapidly cooling air. Disaster had been temporarily averted; the headaches and hallucinations were fading into memory; he was steadier at work, his mind quieter. Will sullenly considered it a universal injustice that some people lived in this state of wellbeing most of their lives, never recognizing how narrowly they avoided chaos.

Yet, Hannibal didn’t believe this, did he? A lesson from one of their first dinners at Will’s house came to mind: Only those who know anguish can know the sublime. Will found his envy fading at the thought. Maybe those mercilessly happy people were numb to the joy that came from existing without shadows living in every corner; maybe those people were deaf to the rapturous melody found in the tapping of paws on hardwood floors.

Will lovingly pet the furry muzzle that rested on his knee and was something close to happy.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning greeted Will with a vengeance: The first snow of the season brought winds that nipped at his bones and the oppressive gray unique to winter skies. The change in nature effectively intensified Will's anxiety; it came to him as a familiar, nauseating flutter in his stomach, one that descended upon him before he opened his eyes. It was absurd to have such a marked visceral reaction to *attending a symphony*, but this event somehow coalesced a good number of the elements Will actively avoided in daily life: pretentiousness, superficial small talk, tightly-packed crowds, unspoken rules, self-congratulation, and-- as a cherry on top-- suffocating attire.

Beyond the concert seeming objectively miserable, there was also an inherent peculiarity in going somewhere with Hannibal. They saw each other in their homes and workplaces or when sent on a mission by Jack; this was different, even if Will was technically only attending to try to identify potential suspects. Music meant something to Hannibal-- it enriched the man's world in a way Will couldn't easily grasp. The closest comparison was likely his own relationship with his dogs, and Will supposed that if Hannibal could greet them by name and bring them bits of sausage and jerky, he could endure wearing a suit and tie without excess complaint. Moreover, this was another window into Dr. Lecter's world; it could provide information about the unusual man that Will might store alongside his knowledge of Hannibal's sister and meetings with Dr. Du Maurier. Fleeing would fracture their friendship. The entire situation reminded Will why he avoided entangling himself with the rest of humanity, but it was too late now.

Will threw on something resembling appropriate clothing-- a mishmash of flannel and a coat dug out of a closet-- and walked the dogs. When they arrived at the stream near Will's home, he could see Winston toying with the idea of splashing through the water in spite of the cold. Will whistled him back to his side, and the dog looked up at him with innocent doe eyes. Winston had not yet spent a winter with Will; watching the newest member of the pack trot through the powdery snow alongside the others sent an ache of joy through the man, temporarily shaking his worry.

At home, Will dried each off while telling them to be good while he was gone. Once the dogs were dried and settling in for a nap, Will finally showered, ate a filling but childish lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese, and changed into a black suit he hoped was unremarkable enough that he would go unnoticed, a ghost in the crowd. Appropriately, he looked like he was a pallbearer at a funeral.

Driving to meet Hannibal at his Baltimore home, Will struggled against the temptation to turn around, the silence in the car giving his thoughts too much space. He flipped through radio channels and landed on the first classical music station he found; he felt like he was cramming for a test. Halfway there, he turned the music down to a hum and worked back through the profile of the man he hoped to find today: Skilled craftsman, musician, physically capable of hauling a grown man's body, arrogant, an established member of the music scene. Will could almost picture him, a sturdy shadow craned over the arranged corpse of Douglas Wilson.

Will parked and drug his feet going up Hannibal's walkway. It felt like leading himself to execution. Will knocked twice, and when Hannibal appeared at the door, he was the picture of poise: He wore a well-fitted gray suit, dark gray waistcoat, and light blue button-down; his checked tie picked up the suit's gray, and his pocket square was a navy blue to compliment the shirt. The clothing was immaculate but not showy-- relative to Hannibal's standards of ostentation, of course.

"Will, come in," he greeted and stepped aside for the younger man to enter. Hannibal glanced him up and down, smiled with his eyes even as the rest of his face remained inexpressive, and breezily commented, "You look nice. Wait here just a moment."

He turned back toward the recesses of the house, leaving Will more unsettled than he'd been during the drive. If Hannibal had passive aggressively remarked on the shabbiness of his suit, Will would have been glad to jab back at him; likewise, if he had quoted a Romantic poet on the nature of beauty, Will would have shrugged it off as part of the man's flair for theatrics. Somehow, the uncomplicated mundanity of the statement made it far more startling. Will shook his head at himself, realizing he might be overthinking.

Hannibal came back, tickets in hand, and they headed toward Hannibal's car. Will had impulsively slipped his glasses on before leaving Wolf Trap, and he was glad he had something to fiddle with during the short drive. Hannibal turned on a piece by Sibelius, the composer being showcased that afternoon, and recited biographical information Will was fairly sure he didn't need to know. For instance, the fact that the man had written Finland's unofficial national anthem was unlikely to color Will's opinion of the symphony. The sound of Hannibal's voice was pleasant background noise, though, and it was interesting to see something like enthusiasm in the man's demeanor. This level of focused interest was usually reserved only for cooking.

As they walked toward the main entrance, Hannibal paused, causing the other man to stop as well, panic waiting in the wings to be called upon.

"Will," Hannibal addressed, a note of diplomacy already in his tone, "I recognize this event is unusual for you. Would you be insulted if I made a suggestion?"

Will retorted, "That's never hindered you before."

Hannibal took that as assent and continued, "There will be little mingling before the show; afternoon performances draw a more reserved crowd. I don't expect that to be a point of contention."

Will cocked his eyebrows at the implied dig.

"If anyone interests you, I'll help you find what you need. A stranger asking questions would be noticed."

"Your people are easily alarmed," Will paraphrased. Hannibal let the words glide over him.

"We work together-- you possess knowledge of the case I lack, and I possess knowledge of the individuals you lack. Is this agreeable?"

Though Will desperately wanted to find a point to argue against, Hannibal's warnings were not unfair. The short conversation reminded him of Jack's briefings, which proved to be a strange comfort. Will muttered his agreement, and they entered the building. As they passed through the entrance and foyer, Will tilted his head forward slightly; the look might have read as shyness to those around him, but in truth, he could observe more discreetly with the glasses obscuring where his gaze was focused. The crowd trended elderly, most of the people around them lacking the physical strength needed to handle Douglas Wilson's body as the killer had done. They made it to their seats just before showtime, no clear persons of interest yet.

The chairperson of the community arts foundation gave a brief introduction, the lights faded into black, and music filled the air. For the first few minutes, Will took note of the younger males in the audience, trying to detect any minute detail that might trigger suspicion. He noted a young man with golden hair sitting near the front; he would be physically capable, and sitting near the stage could be a suggestion of his investment in the artform. Across the aisle, a man older than Will-- around Hannibal's age-- listened with a stern brown; he was brawny, but something in the frequent crossing and uncrossing of his legs struck Will as too unfocused to be the killer. Will tried to survey the crowd thoroughly, but in the darkness, it was difficult to accurately read reactions and body language. Ultimately, Will determined it was better to try to enjoy the performance until intermission than continue looking around and possibly drawing attention to himself.

The musicians masterfully handled their instruments, the devices becoming a part of them. The visual fascinated Will more than the sounds; he found himself tuning out the music when he watched a soloist play with the pride that only came from thousands of hours of practice or when he caught a flicker of concern on a player's face signifying a challenging part was approaching. Beside him, Hannibal was transfixed on the action and unabashedly engaged. The degree of pleasure his slightly opened mouth and widened eyes conveyed was rare to behold in any setting; seeing it painted across Hannibal's countenance was nearer to mystical.

Will didn't hear at least twenty-five minutes of the show as he read each musician, a game of sorts, and slyly snuck peripheral glances at the man beside him. A little past midway through the first half of the concert, the touch of Hannibal's hand on his own-- skin to skin-- shook Will loose from his thoughts. Jarringly, the music Will drowned out in his reverie returned at full volume, his mind no longer needing the extra focus required to sink its hooks into the musicians.

Hannibal leaned in close, hand still weighted over Will's, and whispered, "Stay with me, Will. Close your eyes. Listen."

Will felt the warmth of breath on his cheek and ear, and he rushed to process the words and sensations at the same time. Will turned to look at him, their faces still obscenely close, and nodded. The corners of Hannibal's mouth lifted upward in the barest hint of a smile, and he leaned back to his own space, returning to the music's trance.

Will closed his eyes tightly as directed, but he did not hear the music-- the buzz of his flesh and rushing of blood to his face were too loud. Snaps of electricity popped across his chest and neck. It was inappropriate and, sadly, involuntary. Will's general aversion to touch

sometimes resulted in excess sensitivity, but he recognized with embarrassment that this was abnormal even in his skewed perception. The sensations urged him to lean toward the contact instead of away from it-- a compulsion that pinned him, unmoving, to his seat.

He kept his eyes tightly shut and rationalized with himself. He was in a situation that was novel and stressful; the human body could read that as excitement, crossing wires that need not meet. Adding in physical stimulation to a person who was, Will realized with even greater shame, woefully under-stimulated as of late, and the result was nothing short of disaster. When the lights came on signaling intermission, Will stood abruptly and avoided Hannibal's curious gaze. It was divine intervention that, at that very moment, a bearded angel called out, "Dr. Lecter! Will Graham!"

A few rows behind them, Franklyn Froideveaux and an unknown friend watched Will and Hannibal, Franklyn giving a cheerful wave while the friend silently observed the scene.

They met in the aisle, and Franklyn escorted them to the lobby, the friend trailing behind.

"Wow, I mean...this is *crazy*. I can't believe we keep ending up at the same place at the same time," Franklyn enthused.

"One might call it impossible," Hannibal replied.

"I'd call it good luck," Franklyn smiled. "Doctor, you've met Tobias. Tobias, this is Will Graham. He's a friend of Dr. Lecter."

The neatly dressed man reintroduced himself, "Good to see you again, Dr. Lecter. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Graham. Tobias Budge."

Will and Tobias shook hands, the calluses on Tobias' fingers rough even under Will's labor-hardened skin.

"Good to see you again as well, Tobias," Hannibal politely greeted. "Are you both enjoying the concert?"

"It's incredible-- I almost cried. Did you know Sibelius was an alcoholic?" Franklyn asked with what Will read as authentic distress. "If only someone had been there for him, protected him from himself. You can hear his loneliness in the music," Franklyn opined.

"They've sounded better," Tobias assessed, unimpressed. Franklyn looked deflated at that.

"You're a difficult judge," Hannibal commented. "You must have a very discerning ear."

Tobias seemed to enjoy hearing Hannibal describe him; he smiled, showing straight, pearly teeth.

"Dr. Lecter, what do you think of the performance so far?" Franklyn solicited, searching for an ally.

Hannibal spoke in a measured voice, one that contrasted sharply with the emotions Will had seen only minutes earlier: "It is far from the most precise rendition I've had the pleasure of

hearing, but the musicians respond well to one another's cues. It's a skill better intuited than taught."

Franklyn looked at Hannibal first with mild confusion, then with admiration and affirmed, "I couldn't have said it better myself."

"Will, what do you think?" Tobias questioned, examining him. The tone was not friendly.

Will was tempted to shoot down Tobias' inquiry. It was a challenge, though he wasn't sure why. Simultaneously, the wiser part of Will tried to form a diplomatic response-- one that wouldn't alert Tobias to Will's irritation or disparage an institution Hannibal clearly loved. Will decided the truth was the least inflammatory response.

"Your question would be better asked after I've attended a few more concerts. This is my first visit."

Tobias didn't respond; Will wondered if he was disappointed his bait had not been taken.

"Well, you have a fantastic teacher. You're very fortunate," Franklyn interjected earnestly when Tobias failed to reply.

"Gentlemen, it has been good to see you both," Hannibal began, edging on curt, "but I believe Hellen Komeda and Will have an unfinished discussion to continue. Bichon frises, yes? She should be here somewhere," Hannibal lied convincingly, casually scanning the room.

"Excellent memory," Will offered, appreciative of the escape. "It was good seeing you again, Franklyn. Nice to meet you, Tobias."

"The pleasure is mine," the steely man returned, courteous but emotionless.

"So great to see you, Will! Take care! See you Monday, Dr. Lecter!" Franklyn warmly called out.

Will and Hannibal made a good show of circling the space while looking for the absent Mrs. Komeda.

"Know anything about Tobias Budge?" Will quietly asked once they were far away from prying ears.

His face remaining pleasantly impassive, Hannibal answered, "We met only once before. He was content to let Franklyn speak for them both. There's little that can't be uncovered if you know where to look."

Will exhaled hard but didn't let his face slip.

"What did you see in him?" Hannibal questioned, interested.

It was the same question Jack would ask.

“I don’t know yet. It’ll come to me.”

Hannibal didn’t press further, though Will knew the concept intrigued him. Will’s perceptions sometimes manifested as a whole before he recognized the individual pieces, emphasizing further how distinct his “gift” for empathy and rapid associations was from his intentional cognition. He couldn’t precisely say why Tobias Budge caused lights to flash behind his eyes other than the man generally fitting a profile, but Will knew there was *something* off about him.

Will scanned the room, supposedly looking for other possible suspects as he thought of Tobias, but his phone screen lighting up with an incoming call drew his attention. Jack Crawford calling Will on a Saturday was never good news. Will held up the phone for Hannibal to see the name and then walked toward the building’s exit for privacy.

“Jack?”

“Will, we need you in Grafton, West Virginia, as soon as you can get here.”

“I told you I’d be at the symphony. There’s someone here I’d like to learn more about.”

“Forget the trombonist for now. We have seventeen bodies.”

Words failed Will. He knew he would be in West Virginia before dark.

“Okay, I’ll be there. Send me the location, and I’ll get on the road now.”

“Thanks, Will. Prepare yourself for this one.” Jack sounded relieved, as though Will could stand to stay away from a crime scene of that magnitude.

Agent Crawford’s ominous words shrouded Will like a leaden cloak. He returned to find Hannibal involved in a conversation with a middle-aged man. Will’s rapid approach and palpable energy halted both men.

“Excuse me,” Will said to the stranger, no friendliness in his voice. “Hannibal?”

The man looked awkwardly between them, then departed with a muttered, “I ought to go. Good seeing you, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal could see the message Will was preparing to deliver written across his face.

“Duty calls?” he quipped.

“West Virginia,” Will confirmed. Hannibal’s face was unreadable, so Will added in a hushed voice, “Seventeen bodies.”

The muscles holding the other man’s jaw and brow into a blank expression softened, and Will felt less guilty for leaving so suddenly.

“Someone’s been busy,” Hannibal commented.

“I’ll take a taxi back to your house. I don’t want to inconvenience you,” Will said, the closest thing to an apology he would offer.

“Give Jack my best,” Hannibal stated. He looked back toward the open doors leading into the dark theatre as he advised, “Will, if it becomes difficult, call. I’ll answer.”

He was not saying it for the sake of politeness or out of obligation. The idea sanded down the rough edges of Will’s rapidly darkening thoughts. Will was reminded of the day in the hospital room when Hannibal told him of his psychiatrist’s suggestion that he not be so quick to quash the possibility of friendships.

“Whispering through the wall?” Will surmised, not expecting an answer. Hannibal’s eyes flickered back to Will’s own, understanding.

Will turned and began his journey to West Virginia.

Chapter 9

Will beat sunset, arriving on a snowy beach in West Virginia less than four hours after Jack's call.

Agent Crawford waved Will over through the barrier of local police. Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, and Beverly Katz stood in a semicircle at the base of a mass composed of human bodies, rope, and wood. The corpses were arranged to create perfect symmetry in the design; the two lengthwise halves were mirror images. Moving from bottom to top, the bodies were also arranged intentionally; the bodies at the bottom were mostly discolored bones, while the crowning glory was a man folded over on himself who looked like he might open his eyes at any moment.

"Glad you made it, Will," Jack greeted.

"Who could say no to this?" Will answered, his eyes struggling to take in the ornate details of the display. "It's a totem pole. Do we know for sure it's 17 bodies?"

"Not at all," Beverly answered. "I have ten heads, but they don't all match other parts--different levels of decomposition, for one. Some of these are decades old."

"The headpiece is the only recent victim," Jack clarified.

Zeller added, "It's the world's goriest jigsaw."

"I was never good at puzzles," Price chimed in. "Now, checkers, I'm your man."

"We'll make sure you're on deck for the checker murderer, Jimmy," Beverly teased. "Right now, we're collecting and counting. Seven graves, ten heads, and zero killers."

Will's stare remained fixated on the grotesque form as they reported the facts to him. The magnitude of the scene overwhelmed as the strangeness compelled. He began to feel distant, his mind traveling back in time. Jack knew the look on Will's face and shouted, "Everyone move out!"

In his mind's eye, Will assumed the role of the killer: *He meticulously planned the construction of the piece, his ultimate creation. He knew where every body was buried and what role it could play in his monument. He accounted for the frozen flesh of the fresher bodies as well as the decay of the oldest ones; they were all part of the design. He collected his materials, and then he captured the man who would sit atop the totem pole. He made the living man watch; the man would know what was to become of him-- a crown positioned on an empty throne. He finished, and he admired his work. It was his legacy.*

Will came back to himself and found Jack with his eyes. Crawford rejoined Will at the foot of the pole.

"It's a resume," Will explained. "A lifetime of killing twisted into a single monument."

“You think someone killed all of these people? Some of the bodies are thirty or forty years old.”

“Seventeen bodies over thirty years isn’t impossible.”

Cold air puffed out of Jack’s nose in a fog as he exhaled, eyes narrowing slightly in thought.

“Could be. Is this him announcing his retirement?”

Will gestured toward the towering creation and answered, “It’s as good as a gold watch.”

They stood for a moment more in silence, Jack letting Will’s thoughts sink in and Will doing the exact opposite.

“Do I need to stay the night?” Will finally inquired, noticing the darkening horizon.

“No,” Jack responded, shaking his head. “We’ll disassemble and move the evidence tonight, then meet back at the lab Monday. I don’t want it out here any longer than necessary. One of the local officers threw up.”

“This isn’t common in Grafton, West Virginia?” Will snarked.

Half of Jack’s mouth rose in a smile, and he waved the lab team back over to continue their work.

He stopped Will from walking away with a light touch to his shoulder. He spoke in a voice that didn’t invite challenge as he said, “Keep Tuesday afternoon free. You have a 2 PM appointment with Dr. Barry Russell. He’s been in practice for thirty-five years, and he’s moving to Florida next spring.”

Will sighed, already feeling weary just thinking about the evaluation.

“Did you intentionally pick someone I wouldn’t be able to stand?” Will questioned.

Jack glanced at him with raised eyebrows and replied, “Yes. If this is the only chance I get, I need to be sure it’s done right.”

It was hard to hold a grudge when the man was correct. The great irony of Will’s life was that the only two psychiatrists he could stand-- Alana and Hannibal-- were also the only two who couldn’t give him clearance.

Will didn’t argue but also didn’t condone Jack’s choice. As he was walking back to his car, he passed Beverly and Price. He gave them an uncomfortable wave. Once he made it a few yards beyond them, he heard a whistle. He turned his head to find the source; the smirk on Beverly’s face gave her away.

“Nice suit. Is this a new thing-- dressing up for crime scenes?”

“I was at the symphony when I got the call,” Will answered, spitting the word “symphony” out of his mouth.

“Fancy,” Beverly commented. “You don’t strike me as a symphony kind of guy.”

“Were you...inspired by the trombonist murder?” Price questioned with poorly concealed trepidation. It was tempting to antagonize the man but not in Will’s best interest while his psych evaluation was incomplete.

“If you want to find someone who murders musicians, it makes sense to go where the musicians are,” Will answered, his words true but vague.

“Working on a Saturday. You’re making us look bad,” Beverly joked good naturedly. “Price and Zeller already cornered that market.”

Price played at offense with an exaggerated scowl. Will murmured a ‘good-bye’ before he could be asked anything else. Behind him, he heard Jimmy Price telling Beverly she was creating a hostile work environment.

The roads were quiet on his drive home. On a mostly empty highway, the world graying to a wintry dusk around him, every blurred tree he sped by was a totem pole. When he heard a voice in his mind whispering **Watch. Don’t look away.** he started working through his grounding exercise.

He spoke aloud, “My name is Will Graham. It is 7:44 PM. I am traveling from Grafton, West Virginia, to Wolf Trap, Virginia. I was called by Jack Crawford to consult on a case…” Will continued speaking to himself until he pulled into his driveway, and he walked to his front door without letting himself look at the forest.

“Hey, guys. I’m sorry I’m so late,” he soothed his excited dogs. Max hung back from the pack and poked Will’s thigh with his nose. He felt guilty and disgusting when he wondered if the dogs could smell the bodies on him. The others ran into the yard, oblivious to Will’s anxieties. He watched them from the porch and finally made himself face the woods surrounding his house. To his relief, he saw only trees. Less easily shaken off was the gravelly voice cutting into his own stream of consciousness, the voice of an old man tired from a busy night of labor and a lifetime of violence.

I dug up their graves. We lived in the same town. It was like visiting old friends. My muscles ached; I used to be able to do this.

Will put his fingers to his lips and whistled the dogs back to him. He locked the door behind them and headed toward the shower, needing to wash the day from him.

I lived unseen. I built a monument to my own life. There is nobody who would have done it for me. The bodies were frozen when I tied them together.

He tried not to close his eyes as he showered, almost burning them with soap. When he got out, the voice followed him around his house.

Only my victims knew me. They were my friends as their hearts slowed and breathing stopped. I attended their funerals. I sent flowers. Each was beautiful.

He laid down in bed.

Now, everyone will see my work. They will not know me, but they will see the evidence of my life.

Will got up eventually and laid on the floor, bringing his pillow with him. The dogs looked at him with interest but not concern.

I chose them by feeling. They didn't deserve to die, but I deserved to kill.

Just shy of midnight, Will started fingering his phone, remembering Hannibal's advice to call if he struggled. The offer had sounded sincere; Hannibal wasn't one to make false promises.

The final piece was special. He was chosen so long ago now. As he watched me create my legacy, he was the closest I had to a best friend. I stabbed him in the heart.

The phone only rang a few times, but the wait was unbearable. In those moments, Will's stomach turned to lead and he believed from the depths of his psyche that he would spend the rest of his life lying on his floor listening to unanswered ringing.

Time started again when Will heard Hannibal's voice.

"Will? Is everything all right?"

Hearing his name from a familiar mouth was enough to remind him to take a deep breath.

"Will?"

"Yes, yeah, I'm fine."

The absurdity of the lie meant Will did not need to backpedal-- they both knew the truth.

"Did you want to discuss your trip to West Virginia?"

"No, not really. Were you asleep?" Will was feeling increasingly ridiculous.

"I told you to call, and you did. Are you having trouble leaving your killer where he belongs?"

Will made a noncommittal noise.

"I'm hearing his voice. It's getting a little crowded."

"You want me to help you evict him?"

"Something like that."

"Let's review your day. It started as yours, and it should end as yours. Go from the beginning."

“I woke up early. I was...god, this sounds stupid, but I was nervous. I really didn’t want to go to the symphony. I took my dogs for a walk. It was Winston’s first snow with us.”

“How’d that make you feel?” Hannibal interrupted with Will’s least favorite psychiatric question.

“*It made me feel* like he was part of the family. He fits us.”

There was a pause but Hannibal didn’t speak.

“Then, I had lunch and got ready for the concert.”

“What did you have for lunch?” Hannibal interjected, unsurprisingly.

Now Will was the one pausing, delaying Hannibal’s scolding.

“Grilled cheese and tomato soup.” He tried to sound confident in his culinary choice.

“*Will,*” Hannibal exhaled, exasperated.

“And then I took a shower and thought about how my suit made me look like an undertaker.”

A breathy sound that could equally have been a chuckle or a long-suffering sigh came through the phone.

“When I was driving to Baltimore, I listened to a classical music station. It didn’t help me. You know the rest-- you were there.”

Will hoped he didn’t press, not wanting to repeat the uncomfortable afternoon.

“I was. Has your mind started to become a more familiar place?’”

“I think so.”

“Can you sleep now?”

Will knew the appropriate answer, but he also recalled too clearly the sound of the voice recently whispering across his mind.

“No. I don’t know.”

A long moment of silence passed between them, and Will was almost ready to take back his words and hang up. He was glad when Hannibal spoke again.

“Would you prefer to speak or listen?”

Will felt tired and less sharp than usual. He took the exit offered to him.

“Listen. Tell me something about cooking.”

The subject was safe and brought to mind them cooking together before having dinner with Alana. He also knew Hannibal could speak, uninterrupted, about food and its preparation for hours.

Hannibal made a thoughtful sound, plucking a recipe from his memory.

"I will tell you the correct way to make grilled cheese and tomato soup."

A laugh escaped Will's throat before he could stop it. He hated giving the man the satisfaction.

"Follow along. The more vividly you can picture my words, the better."

Will took a deep breath and adjusted the pillow under his neck. He stayed on the floor, Buster having come to cuddle against his hip. He closed his eyes and pictured himself in Hannibal's kitchen, standing side-by-side with him for another cooking lesson.

"You must first learn to make bread…"

Will was asleep before any tomatoes had a chance to enter the scene.

Chapter 10

The first thing Will noticed on Sunday morning was a dull ache in his neck and lower back. Sleeping on a hardwood floor was not a good idea past the age of twenty, he decided. The next sensation brought to his attention was fur against his arms; he opened his eyes to see three of the dogs pressed against him. He sat up testingly, stretching his muscles and giving the dogs a chance to spread into the space where his torso had just lain. Winston and Jack watched him from his bed, unremorseful. Will let himself get to his feet before humiliation set in.

He groaned at the fresh memory of being talked to sleep by Hannibal. It was wrong to make midnight phone calls to friends; it was worse to fall asleep during said call as though their voice was a lullaby. Will rubbed his hands to his eyes, hiding from the world.

"You could've stopped me," Will said to Winston, who watched him from the bed.

He unlocked and opened the door for the dogs, a cue that sent them scurrying toward the snowy yard. Will grabbed a jacket and stood on his front porch to watch them, still in his sleep clothes; maybe Freddie Lounds could snap a picture of this for one of her headlines. He watched the pack of dogs dart pathways through the snow, but his mind was still on the floor inside.

He thought about apologizing, but Hannibal was too polite to let him do that. The man would just remind him that he told Will he could call him and tell Will not to worry. However, Will was sure Hannibal hadn't meant he could call him at midnight to ask for cooking tips. This was a gold star moment in Will's lifetime of social missteps; further, it was a glaring reminder that Will had done far too good of a job isolating himself. Between this and the laughably intense reaction he'd had to just *having his hand touched and feeling breath on his skin*, he felt like he was short circuiting, and Hannibal had unfortunately become the target of it.

Will went in to make coffee, leaving the dogs to entertain themselves alone for a few minutes. He filled his largest mug and encircled it with his hands, the heat familiar and comforting. Sipping coffee and watching his pack through the screen door now, he wondered if the problem was how thoroughly he'd avoided connection or that he was now wading back into the pool of humanity. It was easy to forget what you'd deemed impossible.

Barring yesterday, he had felt like he was doing better at tolerating, if not appreciating, others lately; although, admittedly, friendship with Hannibal came smoothly in part because of the other man's own self-professed difficulty with closeness. But he'd also seen Alana a few times at work during the past week, and she was friendly with him again and as lovely as ever. They didn't discuss Hannibal or Will's mental state, but she'd asked him about his first days back and his headaches. She cared about him in a clean, simple way.

And more than how others had reacted to him, Will himself was becoming something different now, wasn't he? He was working interesting cases, he was teaching classes, he was

not *exactly* shooting down Beverly and Price when they tried to give him a hard time, and he had people who wanted him to be more than just alive. Will Graham was becoming an identifiable person each painful time he let someone who meant well take a step closer to him or he pushed an unbidden voice out of his head.

Will called the dogs in and dried them off, needing to move. He lit a fire, and they negotiated space with one another in front of it. Will filled their water and food bowls and then found a box of cereal in his cabinet to feed himself; he guessed Hannibal would probably know how to make gourmet cereal as well if asked. Another flush of embarrassment ran across his chest and face at the thought.

Somewhere between doing the dishes and brushing his teeth, Will started seriously considering asking Alana Bloom on a date. If Will was bad at friends, he was worse at dating-- to the extent he'd essentially quit a few years ago. He didn't date in high school; he moved too often and was a walking bag of unmanaged neurosis and misplaced empathy. College was better, but his innate habit of mimicking the habits and even thoughts of those around him had led him to being more confused than not about who he truly was. There was a girl at the end of college and through the beginning of grad school who'd been his first real relationship; she ended it shortly before he finished his master's program because she felt like she didn't know him even after two years. She wasn't wrong, and when they stopped seeing one another, he felt the loss of the parts of her life he'd absorbed more acutely than the loss of the woman herself. Sprinkle on top a few tragic dates with friends of colleagues in New Orleans, and Will came to the conclusion that avoiding relationships altogether was better than the constant stumbling he was doing.

Hopefully wiser and undeniably more even-keeled, a relationship wasn't completely out of the question anymore. It was pointless to deny some degree of loneliness now-- people with satisfying relationships didn't have meltdowns when a friend touched their hand and didn't keep that same friend on the phone for 48 minutes in the middle of the night. As much as Will preferred to believe he had, by sheer determination, transcended the need for romantic relationships, he now knew he unmistakably had not; he shared the all-too-human need for touch and even the romantic notion of having someone to turn to when the nightmares came.

He couldn't quite picture Alana curled up in his bed, fitting into the curve of his body, but he also didn't find the idea *unappealing*. He'd found her soft features and intelligent eyes attractive from the first time he saw her; her personality-- sweet but no-nonsense, casual but disciplined-- added to that allure over the years. Sometimes, he thought he'd seen something warmer in her eyes toward him, as well, and that was almost as enticing as she was; it would be good to be the man Alana Bloom could find attractive and devote her well-managed time to.

Working on an engine in the barn, space heater blasting, Will convinced himself he could do this. He would find Alana tomorrow and ask her on a date. If she said no, she'd do it nicely, and he'd feel awkward but survive. If she said yes...well, he'd figure out what he'd do if she said yes when the moment presented itself. The rest of the day crept by under this new resolution.

Thankfully, Will's Monday classes went quickly and finished unremarkably. The students' final was fast approaching, so they had miraculously renewed interest in taking good notes and asking thoughtful questions. Fear was a strong motivator.

As the last students exited the room, he cleaned his glasses against the flannel shirt under his coat and took a deep inhale. He would find Alana, ask her out, and then hide in the lab with seventeen bodies. It was a rough yet decent plan.

He tried working through what he wanted to say again in his mind. He got to "Hello" when the woman herself appeared in his classroom doorway. Her hair was twisted back, and she wore a knee-length burgundy skirt and black boatneck top; she was one of the rare people who was as pretty in person as in the golden light of memory.

"Alana," he coughed through a suddenly constricted throat.

She flashed a sunny smile and came to stand by him in front of his desk.

"I heard about the totem pole."

"Never a boring day with Jack Crawford," Will joked nervously.

"The interesting killers must have been waiting for you to come back to work."

"How thoughtful," Will sardonically grinned.

Alana scanned him searchingly, probing him from the outside.

"Are you handling it okay? Being in the field again?" Alana asked, concerned but not mothering.

"Yeah, mostly. I'm doing better than before," Will answered, mostly truthfully.

Alana turned and leaned up against the desk, half-sitting on the edge. Will mirrored her position next to her, their arms not quite touching.

"I'm glad. Keep taking care of yourself. Jack can find another profiler if you start feeling…," she trailed off.

"Unstable?" Will supplied.

She gave him a sideways glance that confirmed his guess.

"Do you think I'm unstable, Alana?"

She sighed and crossed her arms over her ribs.

"I think you were quickly approaching that cliff."

"*Were*?" Will prodded.

“Yes, past tense. I prefer seeing you like this. Like you could be happy,” she said gently. As though she was reluctant to ask but couldn’t help herself, she questioned, “Are you still seeing Hannibal regularly?”

Will’s gaze raised toward the ceiling, and he pressed his fingers into the desktop a little harder.

“I am. He’s been helpful. Don’t tell him I said that,” Will attempted to lighten the mood.

“Not a problem,” Alana answered back immediately. “I haven’t been spending as much time with him lately. I know you don’t want to hear it, but I still have concerns about your relationship.”

“Are we going to talk about this every time we’re together?” Will didn’t hide his exasperation.

“I hope not. I miss your company,” she replied. She thought for a few moments, then continued, choosing her words carefully, “I’m glad I didn’t agree to do your psychiatric evaluation; I like being able to see you without that boundary between us. That’s why I worry about you becoming close to Hannibal-- that boundary doesn’t exist between you, but it should.”

Alana turned her head to watch Will’s face. Her tone was still friendly; she wasn’t lecturing him today, but she was worrying about him. Will wanted to put her mind at ease.

“I’m getting a new evaluation done. Tomorrow, in fact. No more gray.”

Alana’s eyes softened, and she put her hand over Will’s on the desk as she said, “It’s the right choice. Boundaries are more difficult to keep than you think.”

Her skin was warm and silky, and Will felt his heart beat a little faster. He braced himself to feel electric pulses up his arm and across his chest, but looking down at her hand over his, he felt only his normal thread of nervousness at unexpected touch fading into comfort. It was pleasant.

When he glanced back up at Alana’s face, she looked like she might kiss him. She was leaned toward him, watching for a sign. It was a disconcerting thought; she was beautiful, kind, and truly glad to see him well, and he felt comforted by her presence. Yet, he did not feel like he wanted to lean her over the desk and kiss her until they couldn’t breathe-- the feeling he had expected to have in this moment. The dissonance made him panic, and he slid his hand out from under hers to clean his glasses again. She leaned away to a more appropriate distance.

“Dr. Barry Russell,” Will said matter-of-factly. Alana looked at him, confused. “That’s who I’m meeting with tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Alana answered, and Will thought she might have sounded a bit let down. “You won’t like him.”

Will chuckled quietly and replied, “I think that’s Jack’s plan. Nobody can claim he rubber stamped me if there’s no reason for him to.”

“Jack Crawford deserves more credit than I give him. Sometimes,” Alana finished teasingly.

“I’ll let you know how it goes. Speaking of Jack, I have a date with some corpses in the lab,” Will said as he stood.

Alana nodded and also stood. She smoothed her skirt and assured Will, “You’ll do fine tomorrow. Try not to let Zeller’s puns drive you crazy before then.”

She left as he collected his coat from the back of his chair and a few files from his desk. He made sure she was completely gone before dragging a hand roughly down his face, admonishing himself for thinking dating again was a good idea and for blowing off her hints. He was an idiot.

On his way to the lab, Will’s phone vibrated. It was Hannibal. As a general rule, he did not call Will, and the idea that something was wrong immediately sent a cold shiver down Will’s spine.

“Hannibal?” he answered, moderating the worry in his tone.

“Will, I hope I’m not interrupting a class.”

It was odd to hear his voice again after having fallen asleep to him droning on about the best way to get a good rise out of sourdough.

“No, classes are done. I’m heading to the lab to check on the Grafton case.”

“Good. I have learned something you might need to know. I believe your instinct was correct, Will. I’m here with Franklyn Froideveaux, and he has given me permission to call you. I’m going to put you on speakerphone now.”

Will paused, waiting. He stopped walking.

“Mr. Graham?” spoke Franklyn’s hesitant voice.

“Go ahead, Franklyn,” Will directed.

Franklyn spoke in an unpaused rush of words: “You remember my friend Tobias, right? Well, he’s started making dark comments. He...he told him he wanted to cut someone’s throat and play it like a violin. He owns Chordophone, the music shop. He makes his own strings sometimes...I think he could do it.”

“Franklyn, does Tobias know you’re reporting this information?” Will asked, mind processing the words and picturing Franklyn sitting nervously in Hannibal’s office.

“He knows I’m at my appointment with Dr. Lecter. I mentioned I wanted to talk about some things that were bothering me…”

Will imagined how subtle Franklyn was when he said this; Tobias could already be out of the city.

“Franklyn, stay with Dr. Lecter until I tell you. Hannibal, lock the doors. I have to go.”

He ended the call and got to Jack’s office in record time.

“Jack, I know who the musician killer is,” Will breathed out as he entered the office.

Crawford looked surprised but not alarmed.

“The owner of a string shop, Chordophone. Name is Tobias Budge. He’s the one I met on Saturday-- something was off. One of his friends is with Hannibal right now and reported Tobias told him he wanted to play someone’s throat like a violin.”

“Not enough to arrest, but enough to question. Won’t take much more to put him in cuffs,” Jack supposed. “I’ll send officers out.”

“I’m going, too,” Will added.

“Not without a gun. I’m sorry, Will-- it’s too dangerous.”

Will ran a frustrated hand through the front of his hair.

He huffed, “Fine. I’m going to Hannibal’s office, then. The friend is there now. I want to keep an eye on him.”

Jack nodded and said, “If anything feels off, call me. I’ll send more men your way. Until then, see if you can get more information.”

Agent Crawford already had a phone number dialed by the time he finished speaking, summoning the police to descend on Tobias Budge.

Will half-sprinted to his car, headed toward Hannibal’s office. It felt like he hit every red light. He told himself there was no reason for this much worry, that Hannibal and Franklyn weren’t in any direct danger. A sharp-toothed gnawing at his stomach said otherwise. This feeling was confirmed with a sinking dread when he arrived at the office and found the front door slightly ajar. The entrance to the office was wide open; Will imagined Tobias Budge throwing his body weight into the door. He sent Jack a message and made a quiet call requesting back-up. He was too close to the office to say more without being detected; he was not planning on abandoning the scene. He crept through the waiting area, just out of sight and strained to listen.

He heard the sounds of a struggle. He pulled out his pocket knife-- the only weapon he had-- and got close enough to finally see the action. Franklyn was lying on the ground, presumably dead, head turned to the side with eyes bulged but unseeing. Tobias Budge stood behind Hannibal’s desk holding a small sword that usually served as a letter opener over Hannibal’s body. Both men’s limbs were shaking with the effort of the struggle.

“Tobias Budge!” Will called out as he entered the office, keeping a good distance between himself and the other man. Tobias looked up; Hannibal did not, and he took the opportunity to plunge the scalpel he used to sharpen pencils into Tobias’ arm. Tobias took a few steps backward, face still twisted in anger. Hannibal moved off the desk and backed up in the opposite direction; Will noticed he was limping.

“*Agent* Graham,” Tobias panted, “I was disappointed you didn’t come to my shop.”

“Drop the weapon,” Will commanded, though he knew it lacked bite without a gun.

Tobias looked at Hannibal as he said, “You owe me one.” Then, the man turned back toward Will and strode forcefully toward him, letter opener in hand.

He was a skilled fighter, quick and forceful. When he saw the knife in Will’s hand, he changed his approach to a hard kick in the stomach, sending Will crashing backward, still clutching the knife. Will got to a crouch, and when Tobias moved to kick him again, Will grabbed the raised leg with his left hand and plunged the knife into the thigh with his right. Tobias planted himself in front of Will, groaning in pain, and threw a punch that landed at Will’s temple. He hit the ground again, dizzying black spots floating across his vision. Will was back on his feet before he could fully focus, but Tobias was on him. He pulled Will’s upper body to meet his knee, knocking the wind out of him. Will noticed the leg of Tobias’ pants was turning black with blood; still bent over from the blow to the ribcage, Will lunged at Tobias, one hand locking on the open wound. Both men went crashing to the ground, the letter opener clattering feet away.

“Don’t move!” Will yelled, trying to hold Tobias’ upper body down. The man managed a derisive laugh as he threw another punch. He was aiming for Will’s neck, but Will moved in time for it to hit his chest instead. Tobias thrashed, pushing Will off of him. They both scrambled to their feet; the man’s increasingly erratic fury drove him toward Will once again. He pushed Will hard into the shelf by the entrance, glass breaking behind Will’s head. Tobias turned, eyes scanning the ground for the letter opener; he was not happy to find it in Hannibal’s hand.

He walked toward the doctor single-mindedly. They struggled again, both landing blows and drawing blood. As soon as the world stopped spinning, Will was launching himself forward, fixed on Tobias Budge. Tobias had gained the upper hand and had Hannibal’s tie wrapped around his neck; Budge kept kicking Hannibal’s feet out from under him, stopping the taller man from standing. Too consumed in his mission to strangle Hannibal, he did not notice Will moving behind him. Will plunged his pocket knife into Tobias’ side as deeply as he could, hoping to hit a kidney.

The man immediately released Hannibal and howled, whipping around to Will. Will yanked the knife back out, sending Tobias’ hands to his knee as he bent over. Will drove an elbow into the bleeding wound. Tobias stumbled to the center of the room. He groped the floor and rose holding a large glass shard from a side table that had been broken at some point before Will arrived. He put his energy into another rush at Will, swiping the glass wildly in the air. He caught Will’s arm that came up defensively, leaving a deep cut. Will backed away, dodging around the ladder. Tobias could have ended the fight, turned and run away; instead he made his way around the ladder, shard still in his grip. He threw his body into Will’s and

jabbed the glass into the hand holding the pocket knife, forcing Will to finally drop the blade. In spite of the blood pouring from his body, Tobias smiled at the sound of the knife hitting the floor. A part of Will's mind-- one that was his but that he did not understand yet-- decided that Tobias Budge would die today.

Will brought his knee to Tobias' bleeding side repeatedly, causing the man to step back a few feet. Will yanked the glass from his hand, let it fall, and took Tobias back to the ground by sheer force. One knee came down on either side of the man's abdomen, and Will used the bulk of his body to hold him to the ground. Tobias was much weaker than when he'd been underneath Will before. There was no fear in Tobias' eyes, even as Will put his hands on either side of his face, pulled his head up, and then brought it crashing back to the ground with a crack that seemed to echo off the walls.

Tobias' body stopped moving, and his breathing came to a stop. Blood pooled around him in a halo. Will sat back, then moved off of the body. His eyes remained on the blood surrounding Tobias Budge's head.

Silence filled the room in a milky fog. Will's mind had never been as quiet as it was in this moment, not even when he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

Hannibal limped over, bleeding, throat already purple from the attempted strangling. Once he was standing next to the body, Will looked up, vacant, at Hannibal's expressionless face. Hannibal carefully sat down next to Will on the ground, favoring his good leg. They sat silently, shoulder-to-shoulder, until the police arrived.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> You all are wonderful. Thank you so much for sticking with me this far! I don't know when it'll end yet, but I'm having fun. Your comments truly make my day!

Jack Crawford walked into a surreal scene. FBI officers and paramedics crowded Dr. Lecter's usually tranquil space; there was shattered glass littered around the room and splatters of blood on the broken shelf by the entrance, various places across the floor, and Hannibal's desk. Two bodies still laid in the room uncovered; the causes of death didn't look like a mystery for either man. Most unsettling, though, was the appearance of the two survivors. Hannibal sat in his office chair staring at his hands, a perfectly normal image tainted by the angry ring around his neck where his tie had been, dried blood under his nose and lip, and his uncharacteristically rumpled appearance. In a chair pulled near Hannibal's own, Will Graham stared blankly ahead as a young EMT flashed a light in his eyes; he had blood covering one of his arms and both of his hands, and a reddish splotch that looked like it may turn into a nasty bruise was coloring his cheekbone between his eye and temple. A single ribbon of dark red dried blood snaked from his hairline to his jaw, likely a remnant of whatever head injury was now prompting the concussion check.

Agent Crawford came to stand on the other side of Hannibal's desk, drawing the two men's attention. The paramedics continued their work, now laying Will's arm out so that a deep, jagged wound could be cleaned and stitched.

"Will, Dr. Lecter…," Jack floundered, for once not sure what to say. "Tobias Budge killed two officers. What happened here?"

A few seconds of silence passed. Will didn't look at Jack.

"I was with a patient. Tobias forced the door open, killed my patient, and attacked me. Will arrived and told Mr. Budge to drop his weapon. He did not," Hannibal answered directly.

Jack looked around the room, then pressed, "But how did Tobias Budge die?"

Will's eyes flickered up at Jack, but Hannibal spoke before the other man had a chance.

"He charged Will, and then he attacked me again-- strangled me with my tie. Tobias died when he and Will fell to the ground. It sounded like he hit his head very hard," Hannibal paused his matter-of-fact narrative and looked at Jack earnestly, adding, "Will saved my life."

Crawford looked back and forth between the men. He had no reason to doubt the story; in his heart, he believed it was true. His hesitation came from watching Will. The man had just

seemed to be recovering from killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and now he was involved in a second killing. The job Tobias Budge had done on the two officers who went to his shop illustrated his prowess; it was nothing short of miraculous that Will and Hannibal both survived.

“You’ll both need to give a statement, separately. And Will,” Jack said the name with a lower voice, drawing Will’s attention, “you saved a life today. This wasn’t your fault.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Will hoarsely whispered as he let his gaze drop.

Hannibal, having spoken his peace, was lost again to his thoughts. Jack didn’t fault him-- everyone responded differently to trauma, and for a man as calm and poised as Dr. Lecter, today must have been shocking.

Jack made a circle around the room, checking on the progress and directing the agents to get the bodies covered as soon as possible. Then, he stepped into the hall and called Dr. Barry Russell; tomorrow was suddenly not a good day for Will Graham to have his formal psych evaluation. He left the scene, knowing he still had families to notify of a loved one’s death before the media could report it for him.

Will gave a statement-- repeating Hannibal’s words more than choosing his own-- and drove himself home. It felt like a dream: He was covered in blood and floating down a highway. It was still light outside when he left Baltimore, which seemed all wrong and added to the dreamlike quality of the day.

Will’s mind had held a consistent near-silence since the moment he felt Tobias Budge die under his hands; a white noise hummed through his brain, but his normal rapid cycle of thinking was slowed to a stop. His entire body was still overheated with adrenaline. He thought he might fly if he jumped off his roof; Will knew enough about the call of the void to stop himself from going upstairs when he arrived home. The dogs were concerned about the smells-- the blood-- so he let them outside without speaking and walked straight to the bathroom. He turned the water on and let it heat until it steamed. Naked under the water, Will had to wash away his and Tobias’ blood before he could tell where the bruises would form on his torso. He thought he might have a broken rib, but he hadn’t felt it until then. He was vaguely aware the chemical surge from the fight was rapidly waning, and his mind was beginning to reboot itself.

He threw away his bloodied clothing and put on his most threadbare t-shirt and flannel pajama pants. When he called the dogs back in, they looked relieved, as though their real owner was home at last. He fed them and sat at his kitchen table, drinking ice cold water but not eating anything himself. He replayed the fight over and over in his mind, experiencing each feeling anew; every time the memory restarted on its loop, though, the feelings that accompanied it were less potent-- both the exhilaration and the fury. He sat thinking for two hours.

He finally rose and let the dogs out one last time. Buster’s little legs couldn’t keep up with the others, and he tumbled over himself nose first in the snow. Will grinned at the little dog’s

tenacity, and the dam broke. Guilt and fear rose up in him like twin monsters; he was now twice a murderer. This idea was marginally less distressing than the inescapable truth that he had allowed himself to kill Tobias Budge-- had given himself permission in the heat of the fight. Maybe he could have subdued him instead, held him in place until the officers arrived. Realistically, Budge would not have stopped until one of them died, though, and some part of Will realized that and unilaterally decided that Budge would be the one killed. It wasn't the voice of Garrett Jacob Hobbs or the mysterious totem pole murderer whispering in Will's ear.

Will called the dogs in, dried off the dampening snow, and checked all of the downstairs locks twice. He sent an email to his Tuesday classes announcing that he was giving them a study day before their Thursday final and telling them to use it wisely; he knew they would hear about the day's events soon enough without his input. When he went to bed, he called Winston, Jack, and Max up-- it was their lucky day. The others were either too small or too creaky in the joints to hop up and down easily, but they laid a little closer to the bed that night. Will dreamed of sitting alone in a theater, watching an empty stage turn blacker and blacker, though he wasn't sure if the performance was over or if he was waiting for the next act to begin.

He woke up the next day feeling disturbingly similar to how he had felt the previous morning. There was no spot of blood on his hands that water could not wash off; he didn't hear a heart beating under his floorboards; he didn't see the specter of Tobias Budge sitting at his piano, shaming him for shoddy upkeep. The sun coming in through the fogged windows confirmed that the sun had risen, and the world continued spinning. Will wondered if this was it-- if this was what finally caused him to break from reality. Maybe he was sitting in the BSHCI right now in a padded cell imagining the soft snuffling sound Harley made and the feeling of warmth from the presence of the three big dogs sleeping around him. He needed to feel real, even if that meant experiencing actual guilt for what he'd done.

By 8:00, Will was on the road to Baltimore.

By 9:05, he was on Hannibal's doorstep.

Hannibal answered the door looking unnervingly casual-- a heathered gray v-neck sweater over tan slacks, hair falling diagonally across his forehead instead of combed back. The ring of purple around his neck popped against the relative informality of his clothing. Will wondered if that was an intentional fashion statement.

"Can I come in?" Will questioned brusquely.

No sign of offense flashed across Hannibal's face as he stepped aside.

"Coffee?" Hannibal asked pleasantly. Will nodded, feeling less real by the second.

As Hannibal worked, he talked.

"How did you sleep?' he asked.

Will exhaled a single, bitter laugh, "Like the dead."

Hannibal gave him an eyebrow raise that wasn't exactly scolding him but also wasn't terribly amused.

"You sound unhappy about that," the man observed. "Most would consider it extreme good fortune after what happened yesterday."

Will started pacing around the kitchen, the movement keeping his words warm in his throat.

"I killed a man with my hands," Will said as explanation, as though his meaning should be perfectly obvious.

Hannibal passed a mug to Will, then added to Will's statement, "A man who was trying to kill you. And me."

Will continued walking around the room, now with a glass to focus his fidgeting on.

"It shouldn't matter. He was still a person. I killed him, and then I just...went home, like nothing happened."

Hannibal stirred his coffee slowly in thought, considering Will's perspective.

"You said it *shouldn't* matter why Tobias Budge died, yet what *should be differs from what is. Does this mean you believe he deserved to die?"*

Will didn't answer but sat down in the corner armchair, glowering.

"Focusing on semantics leads to superficial conclusions," Will spit out.

"God forbid you say what you mean," Hannibal pushed back with a still-friendly inflection. "Do you regret killing Tobias?

The coffee wafted hints of chocolate and smoke upward in its steam. Will stared into the liquid, wondering if Tobias' last coffee had been as good as this one, not actually caring what the answer was.

"No, but I wonder if there was another way-- if I wasn't forced to kill him but chose to."

Hannibal watched him hawkishly, not letting Will slink away.

"There's always a choice. We may be influenced to act or react a certain way, but free will is not contingent on circumstance. What would have compelled you to make the choice to kill Tobias Budge?"

Will shook his head and answered, "I don't know. He stabbed me in the hand, then he smiled at me. I just...knew he was going to die. That I was going to murder him."

"Rage?" Hannibal guessed. "Uncharacteristic of you."

"No," Will disagreed vehemently. "I wasn't mad. I should have been. It was...power, control. He wanted to control me; I wanted to control him."

“You won, Will,” Hannibal offered. “Victors don’t spend the night after battle worrying over their fallen enemies. In a life or death fight, you chose life-- for yourself and for me. It is the most basic of human instincts, and it allows no room for shame.”

The words floated through Will’s brain. He had felt victorious yesterday; perhaps that was his problem-- the all-consuming, omnipotent sweetness of victory.

“I’m not ashamed,” Will claimed.

Hannibal’s eyes remained locked on Will with devastating curiosity. As if finding the knowledge somewhere in Will’s tightened jaw, he surmised, “Your lack of remorse is what you feel guilty for, not the murder.” The man thought for a moment longer. “Do you think all people who murder are evil?”

“No,” Will quickly responded. “There are always unforeseeable circumstances. It’s why self-defense isn’t prosecuted.”

“You acted in self-defense, you would not undo your actions, and you do not believe murder makes one evil, yet you are on the verge of self-flagellation in my kitchen. What are you withholding?”

Will met Hannibal’s inquisitive gaze as he said, “I don’t feel real anymore.”

Hannibal moved closer to him in the kitchen, drawn by the disclosure.

“But you felt real when you killed Tobias?”

Will nodded, staring intensely at the other man.

“Dichotomies are favored by the human mind because of their simplicity. Good, evil. Moral, immoral. Real, unreal. I could tell you that you are here and you are real, yet the world exists in more than two shades.You might need to reconsider how you define your reality. ”

Will’s eyes dropped to the floor, lost in thought at Hannibal’s suggestion.

“Redefine my reality so that I can go to bed a murderer and wake up an FBI agent?”

Hannibal said simply, “So that both realities may exist simultaneously instead of splitting you in two.”

They both let quiet sink in before either spoke again. Will ran his finger around the mug handle, thinking about two copies of himself vying to exist until they melted into one another.

Finally, Hannibal suggested, “Let’s move to the living room. I’ll build a fire.”

Will seemed to remember himself and replied, “I shouldn’t have come over like this-- I can go. I’ve already dragged you into my world enough.”

“Nonsense,” Hannibal brushed off the offer. “I admit there is an appeal to having company today. Yours, specifically.”

Will stood and walked behind Hannibal in the direction of the living room. "It's good to have someone to commiserate with," he responded.

As Hannibal built the fire, Will let himself fall into the corner of the couch, head leaned far back and eyes on the mounted antelope.

"I was supposed to have a psychological evaluation today," he said idly.

"Postponed, I'd imagine?" Hannibal asked from where he crouched by the fireplace.

"Yeah. No way to tell if I'm stable if I'm in a situation where you're supposed to be unstable," Will explained.

"It would be poor form to have a psychological evaluation the day after a murder," Hannibal commented, drawing a heavy sigh from Will. The fire finished, Hannibal joined Will on the couch.

"Yesterday, before everything happened, I almost thought I was okay enough to start dating again," Will shared, twisting the coffee mug between his hands before taking another sip.

Hannibal's face remained stoic as he encouraged Will to continue with an, "Oh?"

"I tried to ask Alana Bloom out," Will went on, then looked quickly at Hannibal and added, "Should I have told you before? You and Alana..."

Hannibal shook his head. "I don't have feelings for Alana. No harm done."

Will looked back at the antelope and continued his story, "I didn't really think she'd say yes, but then she came to my classroom, and she seemed...interested? I thought she was going to kiss me."

"So your attempt was successful?" Hannibal inquired.

An amused huff came from Will's nose, and he said, "I panicked. She put her hand on mine and it just wasn't...I don't know. I sound like a teeanger." Will's free hand came to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Romantic relationships challenge even the most composed among us. You allowed yourself to desire a connection. It would have been easy to assume Alana's interest as yours, yet you maintained the wall between her wants and your own," Hannibal stated.

Will flashed a brief, close-lipped smile at his mug and replied, "It sounds better when you say it than when I think it."

"It would be a difficult relationship. She would feel an obligation to her field of study to observe you; you'd resent her for it," Hannibal observed, firm but not unkind.

The younger man let himself sink further down into the couch as he agreed, "I know. Maybe my body understood before my mind."

“Don’t forbid the possibility of connection because you had an unexpected physical reaction to Alana. It’s unfair to you,” Hannibal chided.

Will sighed again and took a long sip of coffee, the mug almost empty now. For a few moments, Hannibal and Will watched the fire dance and snap.

“I have a question,” Will finally said, seriously. Hannibal glanced at Will and cocked his head to the side, waiting. “What did Tobias mean when he said, ‘I owe you one’?”

Hannibal looked back at the fire and kept his expressionless gaze locked on the flame in front of him.

“It’s difficult to say,” Hannibal began, “but I assumed he meant he wanted to take a friend from me to compensate for my role in alerting the FBI. Franklyn may not have ever reported Tobias if not for my encouragement. I can’t help but feel responsible for his death.”

Will glanced over at him and responded, “None of us knew that was going to happen. Tobias killed two agents before he made it to your office. Franklyn was a bad judge of character; he got caught up in a dangerous situation.”

Hannibal nodded solemnly.

They remained in companionable quiet for many minutes, the only sound the occasional crack from the fireplace.

Abruptly, Will broke the silence, eyes still trained on the fireplace ahead.

“When I got to your office yesterday and saw Franklyn on the ground, I thought you were dead,” he said reflectively.

Hannibal half-looked at him and replied, “When Tobias arrived, he said he killed the officers who came for him. I worried you were among them.”

A few seconds passed, then Will told the other man in a quiet voice, “I tried to imagine a world without you in it. I can’t anymore.”

“The price of love is in its loss,” Hannibal intoned. “I was glad to see you alive.”

Silence resumed and reigned over their afternoon, Will and Hannibal existing both apart and together in the firelit living room.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

> Thank you all again! I can't say it enough. Your comments are amazing, and I'm so glad you're enjoying the story!

As afternoon faded to evening, Will began to feel solid. The warmth of Hannibal's living room and the easy conversation broken by long, comfortable silences were washed in a humanity Will had not felt since before killing Tobias Budge the previous day. However, thinking of the sun setting and his dogs cooped up in the house all day, he longed to be home again, surrounded by reminders of his life-- nearly-finished fishing lures on his worktable, fur-covered dog beds around the fireplace, book shelves lined with a combination of anthologies and textbooks that hadn't been touched in a decade, along with the dozens of other signifiers that he had a life beyond killing.

On Will's way out the door, Hannibal asked, "Our usual time tomorrow?"

It didn't seem possible that tomorrow was the middle of the week; years passed with each hour.

"Yeah," Will nodded. Thinking of his schedule for the next day as well as the longing for familiarity that had overcome him, he asked, "Dinner at my house?"

Hannibal blinked twice, as much a sign that the request was unexpected as Will had come to expect from the man.

"Yes, I would like that, Will. Which of us will be the chef?"

Will scrunched his face slightly and put a hand to the back of his head, already regretting the offer.

"I will put a plate in front of you with food on it."

Hannibal's eyes smiled, the glimmering amusement apparent even though the rest of his face was, for all intents and purposes, expressionless. It was interesting to learn Dr. Lecter's tells-- not that Will would pretend to have decoded more than a handful of them.

"I'll bring wine," Hannibal offered.

Will wasn't sure if he was being courteous or subtly suggesting the meal would obviously need some help to taste decent.

The dogs greeted Will as though he had been gone for ages-- as they always did-- but he returned their enthusiasm that evening. He knelt down on his cold porch and scruffed their necks and didn't scold them for pawing at him or jumping excitedly.

"Such a good boy," he said with a hand on Max's neck. When Harley squeezed in, Will put his other hand on her neck and added, "And such a good girl." Buster's tiny snout popped up from between Harley's legs, drawing a grin from Will. Jack's nose nudged the side of Will's face, the dog almost resting his head on a shoulder. Ellie and Winston hung at the side of the crowd, Ellie too prim to endure being trampled and Winston too stubborn to share affection when he knew he could wait the others out. Sure enough, when the rest of the dogs finally went running into the snowy yard, Winston and Ellie edged their way to Will's side.

He walked out into the yard with the dogs and took them on a short walk through the surrounding forest, just enough for them to scamper off some energy. He had the idea that he was seeing the woods with new eyes, the well-known pathways leading him through a snow turning blue as the horizon darkened into blackness. The sun set too early in the winter.

When everyone was back inside, Will started working on dinner. He hadn't exactly cooked much since being released from the hospital, and he didn't think it would be wise to go into tomorrow's dinner without warming up first. He and the dogs both ate a meal based on chicken, vegetables, and rice that night, but Will did at least dress his up with a few more spices. Nothing burned under his watch, so he figured this counted as a success.

During the dogs' last release into the yard, Will double checked the final exams he was to begin administering the next day and sent his students an email both reminding them of said exams and letting them know he would be back. Any students who wanted to gossip about him would have the opportunity to do so tonight instead of tomorrow, standing too close to the classroom door.

Will's dreams were not quite nightmares-- he knew those intimately-- but they weren't entirely pleasant either. He was in Hannibal's house, just as it had been that afternoon, but he was alone. The only sign there might be life was a scratching noise; however, every time Will got close to finding the source of the sound, it moved. He wandered Hannibal's home in a search, becoming increasingly frustrated and anxious. It eventually led him to the dining room. Here, Will discovered why he couldn't find the origin of the sound before: It was outside the house. There was something moving behind the glass doors in the dining room, but because of the glare from the light, he couldn't see through them; he could see only his own reflection. Will was moving toward the light switch, eyes fixed on the glass panes, when his alarm clock went off.

His first class of students hung on his every word, watching him like he had transformed into a tiger before their eyes. They would've done better on the final if they'd started listening to him earlier in the semester. The second class was a group of trainees closer to finishing the program; one young man with a crew cut and watery green eyes raised his hand as soon as Will started class. Will looked at him with impatience and vague irritation. The boy cleared his throat and nervously said, "Professor Graham, I just wanted to let you know that we--" he looked around at his classmates, who were throwing him increasingly ugly looks "--heard

about what happened. We're really glad we got to take your class; we've never had a professor stop two murderers during one semester."

Will's expression dropped into one of blankness. The clueless, brazen young man-- who had probably just shared notes from a group chat that had never been meant to reach the professor-- looked at Will with wide eyes, perhaps expecting to be upbraided for his commentary. Instead, Will scanned the rest of the class and said, "This final is 50% of your grade. Try to remember that during the essay questions."

Most students had the good sense to avoid eye contact as the exams were handed out. None tried to approach him after the test.

When all of his classes were finished for the day, Will made his way to the lab to meet up with Beverly, Jimmy, and Brian for a debrief on their findings from the totem pole forensic analysis. In the lab, corpses and an assortment of isolated body parts covered most surfaces. Blown-up photographs of the assembled totem from various angles were displayed along one of the walls. Price stood over an intact but badly damaged body, the man who served as the headpiece, with Beverly at his side.

"Still at seventeen?" Will asked.

"That's our final number," Beverly confirmed.

"No more body bingo for us," Price added.

From nearby, Zeller piped up, "I won-- foot, 1986."

Will looked among the trio, knowing they were joking but wondering how far that joke had gone during one of their all-nighters over the past few days. Gallows humor was the savior of many agents' sanity.

"The most recent body is Joel Summers, 40 years-old, reported missing three days ago by his girlfriend in Knoxville, Tennessee," Price said, pulling the plastic sheet further down on the body between them.

"Single stab wound to the heart. All the other injuries are post mortem. Bones broken, hips and shoulders dislocated," Zeller explained, pointing to various points on the body as he spoke. Joel Summers' skin was more purple than white.

"He's special somehow," Will observed.

Beverly continued their reporting, "Seven of the bodies had dirt on them matching the unmarked graves at the crime scene."

"All wrongful deaths," Zeller interjected. "Strangulations, stabbings, blunt force trauma…"

Beverly picked back up where she left off, "Eight of the bodies are recent grave robbings across West Virginia. All of those were accidental deaths."

“No, these weren’t accidents,” Will asserted. Beverly handed him a clipboard with a list of names and documented causes of death. He pulled a name from the list at random, “Francesca Bourdain did not die of suicide by pill overdose anymore than Joel Summers died from falling down a flight of stairs onto an inconveniently placed blade.”

Price gave half a laugh at that, but Zeller looked uncertain.

“Totem poles tell a story. Joel Summers is the top, and he is the last victim. That would mean the lowest body was the first.”

“Fletcher Marshall, beaten to death in 1973. Body taken from his grave five days ago,” Beverly supplied. “No convictions.”

“There will be a connection between Joel Summers and Fletcher Marshall. His story needed an ending, so he went back to his beginning.”

“He’s been killing for forty years,” Zeller said, finally looking somewhat convinced.

“Sometimes I wish we got a killer who wasn’t so poetic,” Price lamented with a sigh. “A fella who likes to stab and go, for a change.”

“You could join a local PD,” Zeller responded, earning a look of disgust from Jimmy.

Beverly scoffed, “They wouldn’t take him.”

Will felt himself growing slightly uncomfortable, an interloper in the three-way banter. He excused himself, saying, “I’ll come back tomorrow to see what you’ve got. Call me if you need me.”

He escaped without another word but only made it to the doorway when Jack appeared and sternly summoned, “Will, I need you in my office.”

The possibilities ran rampant in Will’s mind. It was probably about Tobias Budge, but it could just as well have been Freddie Lounds reemerging from whatever shadow she was lurking in these days. Entering Jack’s office to find Alana and Hannibal already standing there was possibly more jarring than either of the possibilities he had predicted. Jack closed the door behind Will and went to his desk. He picked up a pen, then placed it back down immediately. It was a gesture that suggested nervous energy, something Crawford rarely exhibited. Will’s anxiety spiked with a tightening in his chest.

“Nicholas Boyle’s body turned up in Minnesota-- frozen. No way to tell when he died. It could have been last week or the night he disappeared.”

“How’d he die?” Alana asked.

Jack looked across the three of them, brow a straight line, and answered, “Knife wound. Gutted. I’m going to have Abigail Hobbs identify the body.”

Alana visibly bristled, hands partly clenching at her sides and her chin rising in defiant anger. “She already has nightmares about him, Jack.”

Hannibal spoke up, “You’ve already identified the body. Why request this of Abigail?”

Jack put both hands on his desk, his body rigid and determined. He had not invited them here to solicit input; he invited them here to warn them.

“You think she has something to do with this?” Will filled in before Crawford responded.

“She’s the common denominator. She’s not telling us everything she knows. I have some questions for her,” Jack directly stated. He glanced at Alana and added, “I want you to observe.”

A noise of indignant protest came from Alana’s throat, a cross between a scoff and a groan, before she said, “I want it on record that I think this is a very bad idea.”

“I want to be there,” Will cut in. He looked at Hannibal, expecting something.

He responded to Will’s look, choosing his words carefully and keeping a dispassionate tone, “She may be withholding information about her father out of a misguided sense of loyalty. Any details she provides will serve no purpose with her father dead, and you may irreparably damage a young girl.”

Jack gave a hard exhale through his nose, tapped his fingers once roughly across his desk, and concluded, “Abigail Hobbs will identify the body. Alana, bring her here tomorrow, 10:30.”

It was a time when Will would be administering a final; Jack knew this-- his answer to Will’s demand. Jack left the room without looking any of them in the eye. Will let his upset paint itself across his expression, his brows drawn together and mouth tight.

Looking at Hannibal, he said, “This is wrong.”

“Abigail is stronger than we know,” Hannibal remarked. “She would have to be to survive what she has.”

A shaky, frustrated breath came from Will’s chest as he growled, “That’s not a theory to be tested.”

“I don’t disagree,” Hannibal conceded.

Will cleaned his glasses harshly, squeezing the lenses between his shirt with pinched white fingertips.

“I won’t let him hurt her, Will,” Alana promised. Will knew the promise was empty-- Jack would do what he needed to pry the information from Abigail’s mind-- but arguing was pointless.

Hannibal checked his watch, adjusted his coat hanging over his arm, and walked toward the door. As he passed by Will, he placed a hand on his shoulder and said quietly, “We can discuss further this evening.”

Alana gave Will a scrutinizing look but didn't say anything. Will went straight to his car from Jack's office, seething.

His dogs greeted him with their usual unadulterated joy, and he tried not to let them sense his anger was towards them. He didn't want them feeling guilty for something they hadn't done. Will washed his face with cold water, then stood outside in the yard with his pack for longer than he'd meant to. The snow and sky were similar shades of graying white, and it made him feel that they could switch without him noticing; the clouds would be cold, too, he thought. The wholeness of the earth around him was comforting in a primal way, one that he could not quite touch. By the time he went inside, his skin was covered in goosebumps and icy to the touch, but he felt less likely to combust.

He gave serious consideration to serving Hannibal a frozen dinner with an appetizer of saltines, but the cooled part of his mind prevailed. He was projecting a chunk of his rage at Jack toward Hannibal, but he wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was the man's perpetually self-possessed demeanor; the conversation in Jack's office had been a time for outrage if Will had ever seen one. Will understood the hypocrisy in taking comfort in Hannibal's unflappable nature but then railing against him for it when the situation changed, but despite this understanding, Will still felt prickly.

When he heard knocking at the door, he called out, "It's unlocked!" instead of greeting his guest. The dogs-- traitors for less than thirty pieces of silver-- rushed to Hannibal, mouths already half-open in expectation. Hannibal did not disappoint them, telling each hello and giving them some unidentifiable meat from a bag. Will only half-watched-- enough to see what was going. The other man entered the kitchen, bottle of wine in hand.

"I thought white would be more flexible for pairing," he commented, placing on the counter a bottle whose price tag made it foreign to Will.

"I'm angry with Jack," Will stated, unprovoked, through a tight jaw.

"I'm aware," Hannibal responded. "And with me?" he asked, sounding like it was an authentic question. The sincerity helped Will refocus his ire on Crawford.

"No," Will answered, not a lie. "Do you honestly think Abigail will be okay?" Will asked, voice less bitter.

"I do. She lost both parents and has endured further abuse since, yet she smiles and asks to play chess when I visit. I see no signs she is on the verge of a breakdown," Hannibal affirmed, believing his own words.

Will paused stirring the barley on the stovetop and looked into Hannibal's eyes as he somberly questioned, "Is that normal?"

Hannibal glanced away before looking back at Will to answer, "There is no normal recovery from trauma of that magnitude. Abigail possesses superior resilience."

Will scanned his face, looking for a sign that he was telling the truth. He found none.

“You’re lying,” he said simply.

Hannibal’s body language did not change, and he did not look away from Will.

“Not entirely.”

Will turned his body to face Hannibal’s, the food forgotten, though he noticed Hannibal glance quickly at the grains.

“Which parts?” Will demanded, voice even but eyes narrowed. Hannibal cast his gaze downward.

“Abigail’s father left a wound in her mind. It’s beginning to scar now, but it was quite raw. She’s had to learn to protect herself.”

The kitchen was quiet; Will’s mind was not. A scene was coming to him, slowly; it wasn’t one he wanted to let manifest.

“Did she have something to do with Nicholas Boyle’s death?” Will finally questioned, hating himself for asking but needing to know.

“Yes,” Hannibal responded simply, offering no further explanation.

“And you knew about it?”

“I helped her dispose of the body,” he answered, not sounding remorseful.

“Why?”

“Nicholas Boyle attacked us, and Abigail reacted. Jack would hang her for what she’s done, and the world would burn her in her father’s place,” Hannibal responded matter-of-factly, as though discussing why he chose veal over beef. Actually, Will realized, he would probably be more passionate about that matter.

Hannibal’s points were true, but Abigail sticking a knife into the young man’s body-- gutting him, as Jack had said-- made Will feel ill.

“She took a life,” Will refocused the conversation to what was important.

“As have you,” Hannibal pointed out, then quietly added, “and as have I.”

At Will’s imploring gaze, he continued, “After my sister’s death, I had a choice. I made it.”

Will’s eyes demanded answers. He reached out a hand and turned the stovetop off. He opened the wine, brought the bottle to the table, and took a drink directly from it, mostly to watch Hannibal look shocked for once. Hannibal sat down across from him; Will pushed the bottle across the table to the older man, an invitation. He did not accept it.

“Self-defense?” Will asked, trying to make sense of the information he had just learned about Abigail and Hannibal. For a second, he wasn’t sure which he was asking about.

“No.”

“Revenge?”

“No, nothing so common.”

Will huffed out a harsh breath and commented, “Your sister was murdered, you killed her murderer, but it wasn’t revenge? That sounds thin.”

Hannibal’s face remained blank, but his glassy eyes told Will he was remembering. He replied, “They didn’t deserve life. My sister’s death was only evidence of that, not the cause.”

Will pulled the wine bottle back toward himself and took another drink. He was struggling with the thought: Hannibal could claim he hadn’t acted out of a sense of vengeance, but how could a young man possibly have made that distinction after so many losses? Losses, Will thought, that might not be so dissimilar to Abigail’s. Maybe when Hannibal visited Abigail’s room, it was himself he saw smiling and playing chess; maybe when Nicholas Boyle attacked Abigail, Hannibal saw his sister. Or, maybe, Hannibal had chosen with clear eyes to kill and then excused Abigail’s transgression in the same unknown spirit. Will struggled to believe if the same man could kill without regret and then bring Will dinner every night because he was ill. Yet, the part of Will’s mind that he knew to be distinctly himself, questioned if it was all that different than Will choosing to kill Tobias Budge and then teaching FBI trainees how to be servants of justice. Extreme circumstances had pushed Will to kill; it was not so surprising, then, to think similar factors had done the same to Abigail and Hannibal.

“Do I need to call my lawyer?” Hannibal asked, uncertain now as he studied the expressions flickering across Will’s face.

Will imagined Hannibal behind bars because he had killed men who themselves murdered a little girl or because he helped Abigail preserve her future. It seemed worse somehow to picture a world with Hannibal in a cage than one with him dead. Will saw himself visiting the other man, watching him pace a cell until his sharp mind dulled. Abigail’s wide, frightened eyes looking at Will from behind bars was an even more heart-wrenching thought. Will shook his head.

“We’re doing the right thing for Abigail,” Hannibal added.

Will looked at him with dark, weary eyes, and snapped, “No more talking.”

He stood and went back to the oven. There was no further fussing with the food; Hannibal would eat what was served or go hungry, and Will was fine either way. He brought two plates with barley, roast chicken breasts that had gone a little too long but had crispy skin, and nearly-blackened Brussels sprouts. He put the plates on the table and then got two whiskey glasses. He poured one halfway full with wine and handed it to Hannibal; he filled his own glass to the brim. Hannibal ate without speaking-- a feat, Will was sure. When only bones were left on Hannibal’s plate, Will tipped back his glass, emptying it.

Will stared at the man in front of him.

“Do you regret killing?” he asked.

“Do you?” Hannibal returned.

“I didn’t expect you to,” Will answered.

“Is it unforgivable in your eyes?” Hannibal inquired, examining the label of the wine bottle now.

“You’re not asking for forgiveness,” Will shot back.

“What am I asking for, Will?” Hannibal pushed.

Will let the question simmer in his mind, though he already knew the answer. He waited for Hannibal to look at him before speaking again.

“Understanding,” Will said, firm in his belief. Hannibal didn’t argue. “You’ve *seen* me-- or at least you believe you have. You want to be seen, as well.”

Hannibal held the gaze, both men looking for some sign of agreement but too wary to extend it first.

“It’s human to want to be known-- to be seen, as you said. It is painful when someone looks away.”

Will took a deep breath, not a sigh but approaching one. He refilled both glasses with a reasonable amount of wine. Running a finger along the top of his glass, Will thought about friendship, his hands around Tobias Budge’s face, and Abigail’s frightened eyes under her father’s knife. He thought about his dogs, cooking lessons, and fancy chicken soup. He thought about blood sprayed onto his glasses, fireplaces, and a faceless little girl.

He sat back in his chair, hand still loosely circling the glass. He was aware of Hannibal watching him now.

“I finally find you interesting,” Will mused into his wine glass, his voice giving no hint as to his feelings.

Chapter 13

Thursday morning came with a brilliant blue sky, the kind that only seemed possible when every other day presented slate-gray from sunrise to sunset. It was the final day of classes for the term, and Will was not sorry to see them end. There would be more than a few students whose FBI aspirations ended this week, just in time for them to lick their wounds over the holidays, surrounded by loved ones who could start rebuilding broken dreams and egos.

When all exams were administered and his classroom was released into the realm of solitude, Will allowed himself a few moments in the light of day to process what he had learned. Abigail would have already identified Nicholas Boyle's body by now; he could only wait to hear if she had successfully concealed her involvement or if Jack had pried the truth from her. Will knew this answer would find him, and he was not ready to seek it out-- it would require lying to Jack Crawford. Although, if Will were being honest with himself, he had already lied to Jack; he let the man believe Tobias Budge died after he fell to the ground, hitting his head against the hardwood floor of Hannibal's office. Will never corrected Hannibal's statement-- he never added that Tobias was alive when they hit the ground but not after Will's hands met his skull. Was one lie greater than the other, or did lying count equally across all other sins?

Will came to the same conclusion he'd arrived at in bed the night before, staring at the 3 AM ceiling: It didn't matter. They all took their capacity for killing and enacted it upon the world. The victims were not blameless, nor did their own versions of wickedness absolve their killers. There was no innocence here, and there was no way to restore the lives taken. In the most pragmatic sense, it did not change anything if the gory details were brought to light. What Will had yet to determine was how these drops of knowledge tinted his own view of the world.

His phone lit up with a message from Jack before he had any epiphanies: *Lab has info about Joel Summers.*

Six hours later, Will stood outside the home of Larry Wells, watching as he was escorted to the back of a vehicle. The man was so confident he'd left sufficient clues that he packed up his entire home; it would be a rare treat for Beverly, Price, and Zeller. Wells' eyes looked hollow and his mouth hung barely open as he was walked out the door-- there was no mercy to be found for the man among any of the agents at the scene. Will had ridden there with Jack, avoiding talking as much as he could; Jack seemed fine with that arrangement, which suggested he hadn't gotten anything useful out of Abigail and didn't want to give Will the satisfaction of self-righteousness. For the ride back, armed officers would be in Jack's vehicle, so Beverly Katz kindly offered to drive Will to Quantico if he was willing to wait for her to wrap up her part of the scene's work. To avoid another three-hour ride with Jack, Will would have walked.

An hour or so after Jack's black SUV left, Beverly exited the home, discarding a pair of gloves in a secure disposal container on the doorstep. With a toss of her head, she indicated for Will to follow her.

“It’s strange to go home without mystery stains,” she mused aloud to Will, who tried very hard not to think of the interior of the car he was getting ready to enter. He was glad to see her take her protective coat off and fold it into a container in the trunk. “I’ll be glad when Grafton, West Virginia, is off the itinerary.”

“It’s the grave robbing capital of the U.S.,” Will joked wryly.

“Was. Good work on Wells. You make our jobs easier.”

Will felt embarrassed at the unexpected compliment and worked out a tight, “Thanks.”

They pulled onto the street, hopefully leaving Grafton for the last time. After about ten minutes, Beverly picked up the dead conversation.

“So, how do you like it? Field work?” she asked with genuine curiosity, avoiding making the question sound like something a distant relative would ask over the Thanksgiving table.

“I feel useful,” Will answered directly.

Beverly nodded, and when she realized Will was done, she went on, “I got into crime scene investigation when I was in elementary school.”

Will cast an inquisitive look her way.

“Our neighbor had a cat named Jingles. It always waited for the bus with us. One day, Jingles was found dead in the street-- a classic hit and run. I identified the perp,” she said, sentimentality creeping into her tone.

“How?” Will questioned, entertained by the idea of a tiny Beverly Katz in a lab coat blocking traffic.

“Jingles was flattened, so I measured the width of the tire with a ruler. I went around the neighborhood measuring people’s tires. Eventually, I found one that fit and that had a tiny tuft of cat fur in the driver’s side rear. Got him,” she recalled, sounding proud even decades later.

The scene played out vividly in Will’s mind, but he had to ask, “What’d your parents think of their daughter measuring dead cats?”

“They bought me a violin,” Beverly answered, throwing a sly smile Will’s way. He laughed, a foreign noise coming from him. Beverly grinned more widely at the sound. “Do I need to ask why you’re doing what you do, or is it the obvious answer?”

Will was relieved at her candor, saving him the pain of trying to explain himself and his past. He replied, “The obvious answer. I am who I am.”

Beverly nodded, no suggestion of sympathy crossing her face.

“Can I ask you a question you’re going to hate?”

Will didn’t speak, which Beverly took as permission.

“What’s your life like when you’re not a crime scene psychic?” Her voice maintained its sincerity; she would accept it if he told her he didn’t want to answer.

Will sighed, adjusted his glasses, and attempted to respond. “I live in the country; the space is good. I fish, I have dogs...I like it when things are quiet.”

“What kinds of dogs?”

“Mutts. Six strays.”

“But not strays anymore,” Beverly corrected, and Will felt his tight mouth soften at the corners.

“Not anymore,” he affirmed. “Each dog that joined the family was easier to train than the last. The others teach them how to behave.”

“More evidence dogs are better than humans,” Beverly quipped, earning a breathy half-laugh from Will, who didn’t disagree. “What about friends, family?”

“Only child. Don’t tell Brian,” Will answered quickly. “Not close to family. Not close to many friends, either. Is this what you wanted to hear?” Will asked, not unkindly.

“I want to know more about you, so if it’s the truth, yes,” Beverly responded.

“I wouldn’t lie about being this antisocial,” Will remarked.

Beverly made a thoughtful noise, then asked, “What about Dr. Bloom?”

The question caught Will off-guard, and he didn’t immediately answer.

“The newbies have big mouths and active imaginations. I’ve heard things,” Beverly elaborated poorly, keeping the details purposefully ambiguous.

“Unsubstantiated,” Will responded. “We’re sort of friends. She likes my dogs.”

A small chuckle came from Beverly’s side of the car at that.

“Your secrets are safe with me,” she assured him. “Any other ‘sort of’ friends?”

Will hesitated, a sure sign that the answer was yes, and Beverly turned her head partly toward him even as she responsibly kept her eyes on the road.

“I don’t know how, but I think I’m friends with Dr. Lecter,” Will answered with, to his vague amusement, complete honesty.

“Now *that’s* someone I’d like to know more about. He’s so…”

“Arrogant?” Will supplied.

“Composed,” Beverly filled in. “But I guess you know him better than I do. What does he even do for fun?”

Will let out a long exhale, weary at how much Hannibal had permeated his last twenty-four hours of existence. It felt odd to talk to Beverly about him as a man whom Will was friends with when Will's thoughts about Hannibal had skewed so much darker since the previous night.

"Psychoanalysis is his primary source of entertainment."

Beverly gave a single scoff of a laugh. Will leaned his head back into the seat and removed his glasses, folding them in his hands.

"You're a fascinating man, Will Graham," she observed cryptically.

"So I've heard," Will dryly replied.

They drove in friendly silence for most of the remainder of the trip, Beverly turning on the radio to a classic rock station at some point and dropping tidbits of trivia. It reminded Will of Hannibal's commentary on the composer on their way to the symphony. He felt a pang of something like nostalgia at the memory, though not enough time had passed for that to be the case. He hated the feeling and himself for having it.

They pulled into the campus to the lot where Will's car was still parked. As Will exited with a small thanks, Beverly firmly said, "Hey-- just so you know, none of us would do this job if we were normal. If you ever need a friend, I'm here."

Beverly smiled again-- like Alana, the expression seemed to come easily to her-- and turned up the music. Will shut the door and walked back to his car; he didn't listen to the radio on the drive home.

In bed that night, he felt closer to unification-- Will Graham the killer shaking hands with Will Graham the special agent. It was nice to not-exactly-pass as a normal person and still be offered a gesture of friendship. He dreamed of being held between two plates of glass-- a specimen-- with Beverly on one side and Hannibal on the other. It was shockingly cozy within that space.

Friday was devoted to grading essays, which meant Friday night was devoted to drinking whiskey on his porch while the dogs played in the snow. Will stayed in retreat that weekend-- working on a boat motor one day and attempting to fish in spite of the weather the next. It wasn't quite time for ice fishing, and he had to make do. The students had two weeks off for the holidays, so when Monday came, the start of a new week meant very little. Will cleaned, took the dogs on a hike, and wandered the house looking for projects. By Wednesday afternoon, the projects he wanted to do were done, and he didn't feel motivated enough to start on the more significant ones, like cleaning out the barn. He talked himself into and out of canceling his standing meeting with Hannibal roughly half a dozen times before he finally had to leave for Baltimore. It was a painfully long drive that also seemed to end in a hurry.

Hannibal greeted Will in disarming attire: A striped button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled to just below the elbows, navy blue slacks, and a white apron tied tightly around his midsection. A paranoid thought crossed Will's mind that he looked intentionally casual, but Will dismissed the idea with a slight sense of guilt; Hannibal had kept Abigail's secret to

protect her, and whatever had occurred with his sister was decades ago and painted over with grief.

Will loitered in the kitchen while Hannibal cooked, trying to control his body language. He swung between wanting to tear the other man apart for putting Will through this and being compelled to pull him into a hug that would, no doubt. be as awkward as the one Will had given him in his kitchen an eternity ago. Will settled on standing on the opposite side of the island and looking at every item in the kitchen except Hannibal.

After a few moments of avoidance, Hannibal held out a knife to Will, the handle pointed at him, and said, “Guest or chef?”

Will’s hand took the knife by the hilt before he consciously chose to participate. He slid behind the island, standing next to Hannibal in what felt like a familiar spot. They fell into a smooth cadence, and Will’s desire to rip Hannibal Lecter to shreds diminished minutely as they worked easily together. Hannibal started by giving Will a basic overview of the meal: Osso bucco with saffron risotto. The meat was already cooking-- had been for quite a while to achieve tenderness. Will was tasked with simple prep work at first-- chopping, mostly-- while Hannibal collected the remaining ingredients for the risotto. After a few minutes of harmonious but silent work, Hannibal began giving a familiar narration of the task they were completing:

“The rice will absorb all of the liquid, but we will remove it before it is fully cooked.”

“Saffron to taste and color, not by the teaspoon.”

Finally, he passed the recipe card to Will and offered only feedback when he happened to glance over:

“Careful not to crack the grains.”

“Perfect amount of butter-- no lumps.”

Will found he slipped effortlessly back into their dance. There was an addictive serenity to it: Collect the materials, apply blade and heat, then reap the rewards. It didn’t feel like this when Will cooked alone, though, and that thought was as troubling as realizing that for all of his anger and worry, he still could not imagine a world lacking the man who worked beside him.

They carried the finished dishes to the set dining table; there were no extra flourishes other than an artful arrangement of birch twigs that probably signified something very profound. As a final note of informality, Hannibal didn’t put his waistcoat or suit jacket back on for dinner. They ate without speaking for several minutes, Hannibal staring lovingly at the food on his fork before each bite. When Hannibal laid his fork gently on his plate, Will tensed involuntarily.

“Will,” Hannibal said, as if he had only just seen him, “I didn’t think you would come tonight.”

A hmph escaped Will's throat behind a mouthful of food. After he swallowed, he retorted, "Made a lot of food for not expecting me to come."

"I was hopeful," Hannibal responded without changing his neutral expression.

"You are an optimist," Will agreed, then took another bite.

"I appreciate you joining me in the kitchen this evening," Hannibal tried again, unfazed. "I read in the paper the Grafton case was closed."

"He killed for forty years without detection. Probably could have died that way. He gave himself to us," Will insisted.

"What prompted him to surrender?" Hannibal inquired.

With a touch of disdain, Will answered, "He wanted to leave a legacy. Be studied by psychologists."

"A normal inclination, though an unusual approach," Hannibal commented.

"He killed his own son. That's more than unusual," Will sneered.

"It could be both," Hannibal mildly replied. After a few seconds of quiet, he switched topics a second time, "Have you again attempted to win the affections of Dr. Bloom?"

Will looked at the ceiling, praying for lightning.

"No, I think that proverbial ship has sailed," Will stated, letting his exasperation be known with a heavy exhale.

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, eyes friendlier somehow, and said, "You shouldn't let a single setback deter you. What was it you advised poor Franklyn? I believe *persistence* was the word you used."

Will smiled at the memory before he could stop himself, and he knew the game was now over. Whatever semblance of moral superiority or indignation he had maintained had been lost; the upward twitch of one side of Hannibal's mouth suggested he recognized this as well. Will put his silverware down and relaxed back into his chair. In a tone that sounded kinder even to his own ears, he answered, "If I want to, I will. I just don't want to right now."

"Fair enough," Hannibal responded with a slight nod and resumed eating.

Will watched him for a few seconds, seeing Hannibal as a human again instead of a shadow for the first time in a week. Blonde and silver hair shown in the light, looser when he was at home than when he wore the armor of Dr. Lecter. Sharp features sloped in cutting lines across his face, but Will could not remember him ever looking at him coldy with his dark eyes.

Will had seen Hannibal's drawings of Paris and Florence-- snapshots in his mind that were released through charcoal and ink. It was a flowery notion, but Will thought perhaps this moment at the table was one that could be held intact in his own mind: Hannibal, the man,

sitting across the table while eating a meal prepared by four hands. Not certain why but compelled to do so anyway, Will stashed the frame in the recesses of his mind, alongside other precious mementos.

He picked up his silverware and remarked, “This is delicious.”

It brought a small to Hannibal’s eyes.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

> As always, I love, love, LOVE seeing your comments, whether it's to discuss something or just dropping a few words. I appreciate everyone reading so much!

Hannibal allowed Will to help with clean-up; Will washed dishes while the other man meticulously cleaned the range, food preparation spaces, and dining table. When the kitchen and dining room were cleaned, they lingered around the island, listless and making small talk with no more tasks to occupy them.

“How did your students fare?” Hannibal asked.

“The ones who deserved to pass did,” Will answered.

Hannibal leaned against the counter opposite the island and said, “You’re difficult to impress. They have my sympathy.”

Will gave a quick quirk of his eyebrows and did not look compassionate toward Hannibal or the trainees.

“They’re home now telling their families how evil I am. It’s better than therapy,” Will half-joked.

“What do you typically do for the holidays, Will?” Hannibal asked, eyes gleaming in interest as he seized the opening for a more engaging question.

“My dogs and I refrain from celebrating.”

Hannibal titled his head to the side slightly and asked, “Why?”

A hand ran through Will’s increasingly untidy hair as he tried to find the least difficult exit from this conversation. “I prefer my family to wedging myself into someone else’s traditions,” he responded sincerely but with a tone of warning.

Will gave him a challenging look that dared Hannibal to diminish the life he had built for himself. The man said nothing further, and his face did not suggest any form of judgment or concealed derision.

“Expecting guests from faraway castles?” Will asked, tone bordering between biting and good natured.

Will tried to envision Hannibal surrounded by family members, but the image wouldn't materialize. He felt pinpricks of sadness but pushed them away swiftly. Hannibal Lecter was not a man to be pitied, and he would sniff out if Will held that thought for more than a few fleeting seconds.

"No, very little family to speak of and none who may travel conveniently. Some years, I'll go to Italy or France. South America is also pleasant in the winter."

Now that was something Will could easily picture-- Hannibal in a linen suit, strolling sunny corridors and charming locals. The mention of living relatives who could not readily travel-- and whom Hannibal could apparently not go to-- gave Will a moment of pause. He decided not to push this line of questioning while the conversation about Hannibal's past still felt like a third presence in the room.

"But nowhere this year?" Will inquired, trying to sound light.

Hannibal kept a steady gaze as he answered, "I considered a few locations, but none appealed so much as my home."

"You've never been sentimental before," Will pointed out, a note of antagonism entering his voice.

"I appreciate ritual, ceremony. Societies elegantly mark the passage of time in this way. Patients often discuss the first birthday or holiday without a loved one; they have to count back to remember the year, but they can tell me precisely how they felt and what changed. Every tradition altered by the absence of another. It's a terribly human reminder of transformation and eventuality," Hannibal philosophized.

Will paraphrased, "You like holidays because they remind you of mortality."

There was a ghost of a hidden smile under the layer of exasperation when Hannibal replied, "Mortality gifts us with urgency; reflection tempers the urgency with wisdom. I recognize the necessity of both."

"If you wanted to ponder the inevitability of death, you could have cancelled tonight," Will remarked.

Hannibal was difficult and unknowable, even in ways Will had yet to detect; he cut people open to bare their truths, no matter the wounds left behind. He was, objectively, one of the worst people Will could fathom spending a holiday with. He was also Will's friend, and he cared in a way that was uncompromising and intense and still somehow comprehensible to Will's own mind. Neither man had mentioned the day's date or given it significance; it was a Wednesday, so Will had simply shown up, and they proceeded with life as they had come to know it.

There was an inscrutable expression on Hannibal's face. The closest Will could come to naming it was acute curiosity, but his eyes had lost some of their earlier intensity and his jaw was relaxed. Will wondered if those penetrating eyes were turned inward, sparing him for a moment.

“It’s good to see you,” Hannibal said softly, almost absently.

They allowed a few quiet beats to pass between them, the air becoming thick; Will could hear blood humming in his ears. He felt light-headed and as though the heavy atmosphere might suffocate him if he stayed any longer.

“I’m feeling tired,” Will murmured. “I should go.”

Hannibal came back to the world from his thoughts, cleared his throat, and replied, “Of course.” He began to lead Will to the door, tossing back the question, “Have you otherwise felt well?”

“Only an occasional headache, sleeping much better, no fever,” Will responded.

“Glad to hear,” Hannibal said as he opened the door. Will stepped out into the freezing night air, expediting their farewells.

“Well, good night,” Will briskly spoke, his breath forming clouds around his face with each word.

“Good night, Will,” Hannibal returned. Will was almost completely down the walkway when he heard the man add, “And merry Christmas.”

Will paused and turned only his head to look back. He’d almost gotten away. He searched for words that would not choke him; he found none. From a distance, he heard himself say, “It was good to see you, too.”

Will walked more swiftly, only breathing again when he heard the front door close. He drove home listening to the classic rock station Beverly had tuned to the week before, but he turned it off when they started their hour of Christmas carol covers by bands from the ‘80s. His dogs greeted him lovingly when he got home, and that joy only multiplied when he got their gifts down from a high cabinet. They were the only ones Will bought gifts for at any time in the year, and they were good at keeping this secret from the world. He doled out bones and small stuffed toys, one at a time. He saw a look in Buster’s eyes that suggested he might try to stir up trouble by stealing from one of the others, and Will gave him a warning whistle. The little dog took his own appropriately-sized chew toy to his bed with a grumbling noise that fell short of a growl.

Sleep summoned him early that night; Jack and Max crowded around him, and Winston laid at the foot of the bed. He didn’t have the heart to kick them off on Christmas even if it meant he would end up having to wash his bedding because of dog slobber transferring from toys to the comforter. He dreamt of Tobias Budge playing music from the corner of Hannibal’s office, covered in blood just as Will had last seen him. Each time a song ended, Will provided him with another page of sheet music; in the moments of silence between the songs, a sound similar to the one he had heard during his dream of being in Hannibal’s home came from the loft. It was unnerving, but Will felt in control of the scene. He did not wake up covered in sweat.

A little after 6:30 AM, incessant ringing brought Will out of his dreams. Jack Crawford calling before it was light out was not unusual; him calling before it was light out on December 26th seemed a bit more odd. He and Bella were an hour away at a cabin, spending what may well be their last Christmas together.

Will didn't have a chance to respond before Jack's voice boomed across the line.

"Will, something happened."

Will shot up in bed, feeling light-headed at the movement.

"What's going on, Jack?"

A deep, shaky sigh came through the phone. Will's heart thudded.

"Miriam Lass has been found. Alive."

"Where? How?" Will questioned weakly. He imagined the girl he'd seen in photographs, now with only one arm, sitting in a hospital room somewhere. There'd be armed agents outside and lab techs itching to collect evidence.

"She said she was in a...pit, in an abandoned building. Someone dropped a rope inside, then left. She climbed out. An 85-year-old woman found her on the side of the road."

"The Ripper let her go?" Will incredulously asked.

"The Ripper didn't grow a guilty conscience. Maybe he has an accomplice who did."

"That doesn't sound right, Jack," Will refuted. "He could be toying with you. I'm not sure what his angle is."

"We have time to figure it out. Miriam is alive and, if the paramedics were right, almost healthy. As soon as medical clears her, I'm going to talk to her. This is our chance."

Nothing about the situation landed correctly, turning Will's stomach. The Ripper had to have a reason for releasing Miriam Lass; it wouldn't be this simple.

"I'll send you a message as soon as I know when she'll be released to our custody."

"Yeah, that'd be good. There's more here, I just don't know what."

"Yet, but you will. We will.

There was quiet, but the call hadn't ended.

"One more thing: Freddie Lounds was reported missing on Christmas Eve. She was supposed to go see her mother and stepfather in Connecticut but never showed. Not an FBI matter at this time, but I thought you should know."

“Any details you’re aware of?” Will inquired, not feeling particularly motivated to search for Freddie but still wondering what had befallen her.

“Local PD found no evidence of foul play in her motel room. She’d paid up through the first of the year and had requested staff not enter-- they were ‘disturbing’ her work. Nobody checked on her. We don’t know how long she’s been gone.”

That thought made Will’s limbs go cold. Had she been missing when he tried to call her that night? She was still posting on TattleCrime. It would make more sense if she had gotten caught up in a more interesting story than Will’s that quickly turned sour; however, it wasn’t like her to let an article drop off her radar like Will’s had.

“Keep me posted-- on both cases,” Will urged.

“I will. Gotta go. I’ll message you.”

The call ended, and Will’s mind worked in circles, recycling the minimal evidence each case presented. He showered and dressed quickly; he wanted to be ready to leave the moment Jack’s message arrived at his phone.

Several hours later, Will stood outside of Jack’s office, being debriefed on what Miriam had said so far.

“Miriam was kept heavily drugged. She remembers being by the ocean, seeing a light, hearing a voice sometimes. But she doesn’t know who he is,” Jack told Will, frustrated and sorrowful in a way that was wholly new to Will.

“It’s better than nothing. She’s the only one who survived him. If we get a suspect, maybe she can identify the voice,” Will offered, trying to give the man something to hold onto.

Jack put a hand to his chin and stared off, not looking at Will-- not truly looking at anything. His mind was with Miriam.

“It would be good for her to see a professional. She needs someone to help her remember,” Jack thought aloud, sounding as tired as he looked. “Do you think Dr. Lecter would come in?”

Will sighed and answered, “Alana would be a better choice. Miriam was just held by an unknown man who put his hands in her mind-- a male psychiatrist might not get much.”

“Alana’s with relatives in Colorado until tomorrow morning,” Jack responded, sounding like he’d already decided his course of action.

“Hannibal will come,” Will flatly replied.

“I’ll call him. Go check on what the lab’s found. See if you can figure anything out,” Jack commanded.

Will left for the lab. When he arrived, three familiar faces looked up at him from their places around the room.

“Hey, stranger,” Beverly greeted, not letting the tweezers in her hand move a millimeter.

“I really didn’t want to see any of you for at least another week,” Zeller bemoaned, writing something on a clipboard and holding up a tightly-closed baggie with his left hand.

Price looked up at Brian from the slide he was examining and cheerily answered, “It’s a Christmas miracle.”

“Z, we could actually catch the Ripper. Get your name in a textbook,” Beverly commented as consolation.

“And not just in teeny, tiny font on the ‘Reviewed by’ page,” Jimmy threw in.

“Do we have anything yet?” Will asked from the edge of the room, feeling impatient.

“Downer,” Price accused him.

“That means no,” Beverly translated. “We’ve just started to dig in. It’s a lot harder to keep a living human clean of evidence than a body. We’ll get him.”

Will stood quietly on the perimeter of the room, then circled around the evidence on the center table. The three investigators continued their analysis and cataloguing, paying him no mind. Sensing his uselessness there, Will left for Jack’s office. It was closed, so he knocked before entering; Jack met him in the hall instead of inviting him in.

“Lecter will be here in about an hour. Could you look at Miriam’s file again? If she mentions anything at all that could lead us to the Ripper, I want both of us to be ready to catch it.”

Will accepted the file and headed toward his classroom; he would work better in the familiar setting than if he found another alcove to duck into. Fewer distractions meant fewer missed associations. He couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more he should be doing. When Will got back to Jack’s office a little over an hour later, Hannibal was already sitting in a chair beside Miriam Lass. Hair combed back from his face and a silvery gray suit fitted to his body, he looked like the psychiatrist Will first met.

Jack waved Will in, and he sat in a chair to the side of the room, Miriam’s file in hand.

“We were just getting to know one another,” Hannibal told Will, then smiled courteously at Miriam.

A swell of admiration for the young woman rose in Will’s chest at the sight of her, one sleeve of the FBI sweater she wore hanging empty. She had been held for years, had a limb amputated, and was found wandering along a highway in the early hours of the morning, yet she sat calmly in the chair, tired but responsive.

“Tell me what you remember,” Hannibal prompted, poised as always.

Miriam recounted the same story Jack had summarized to Will, only with greater detail: “I remember a dream about drowning. Then being awake. And not awake. Being myself, and not myself. I remember I could smell salt air. We were by the sea. For weeks. Months.

Longer. Days and evenings blurred, I'd wake up to the smell of fresh flowers and the sting of a needle. I wasn't afraid. Fear and pain were so far away, on the horizon, but not close. Never close."

"What do you remember of his character, his treatment of you?" Hannibal questioned, his tone gentle

Miriam looked at her hands as she said, "He treated me very well until the end. Until he put me in the ground. Even when he took my arm. He told me what he was going to do. I went to sleep. I woke up, it was gone."

"Did he tell you why he was taking your arm?"

Miriam glanced at Jack, then back to her lap, and answered, "He wanted to give Jack hope."

The three men avoided looking at one another, Jack's head hanging between his shoulders in shame.

"You're doing very well, Miriam," Hannibal encouraged. "Tell me about the light."

Miriam looked up at him, and she seemed nervous for the first time.

"I don't know what to say," she began, "other than there was a bright light blinding me. I was drugged, so everything was blurred together. He was just a dark body coming in and out of the light and a voice."

"What do you recall of the voice?"

"It was male, very...proper. Polite, even. He told me stories...I think he was trying to confuse me. It worked," she gave a single, sad laugh, the most painful sound Will could remember hearing.

"Proper?" Hannibal pushed. "Like mine?"

"No, not an accent exactly. He enunciated every syllable very carefully. Kind of...snobby, I guess? I don't think I'm helping," Miriam ended in a hurry, glancing over at Jack.

"I'm very proud of you, Miriam," Jack responded with watery eyes. "Maybe we should take a break. Get some water, coffee…"

Jack stood, but Hannibal stayed seated.

"Miriam," he said softly, "how long has it been since you slept? Had a meal?"

She blinked at him a few times before her own eyes welled with tears.

"Jack, I think we should try again tomorrow," Will interjected, interpreting Hannibal's intent. "Let Miriam get some rest."

Jack didn't argue for once, cowed by the events of the day.

“Miriam, you can stay with me until your family arrives in town,” Jack offered, and Miriam nodded in response, wiping her damp eyes with the back of her sleeve. “Thank you for your time, Doctor,” Jack said to Hannibal on his way out.

Hannibal and Will walked side-by-side out of the building together, each thinking of Miriam Lass.

“She’s extraordinary,” Hannibal commented once they were outside, away from the institutional paint and mass-produced wall art.

“Nobody else could’ve remained human after what she went through,” Will agreed.

Hannibal halted, turned his body slightly toward Will’s, and sincerely stated, “You could, Will, I have no doubt.” His brow furrowed almost imperceptibly as he added, “I would never wish it for you.”

Standing next to Hannibal, Will mirrored his body language, facing the man.

“We finally agree on something,” Will darkly joked, trying to break the tension that had so rapidly descended upon them.

Hannibal was looking at him with searching eyes. His mouth was slightly open, tips of his teeth visible, and he looked as close to worried as Will had ever seen him. The only other time he had seemed concerned was when Will was preparing to be released from the hospital. Will wondered if Hannibal was picturing Miriam in a black pit being replaced by a man with dark hair and a house full of dogs awaiting his return.

A gloved hand appeared at the side of Will’s face and touched his cheek lightly, then it was pulled back, Hannibal catching himself and the intimacy of the movement. Will felt his face flush and chest tighten, the cold air giving away his increased breathing. They stood, staring at one another, Will’s face hot and body tensed, fiery. The puffs of foggy air coming from their mouths meeting at some point between their bodies and fusing into a single cloud.

“Not a lion meant to be caged,” Hannibal eventually said, voice thick. He turned and walked away. Will watched after his retreating form for a few moments and noticed the hand he had brought to Will’s face flexing and unflexing at his side.

In his car, Will turned on the engine and let the interior warm more than he needed. He felt unsteady and wound too tightly. He needed to think rationally, so he attempted to assess the scenario as impartially as possible: He could think of three times in recent weeks when he had found himself in close proximity to someone; twice it had been Hannibal and once Alana. Will compared the dependent and independent variables, not pleased with the conclusions he arrived at. Something in the design of his unintentional experiment must have been deeply flawed to result in these outcomes.

He let his head fall back against the cushioned rest behind him, and he put a hand to his face. Will needed to realign his mind and body, fix whatever was *newly* broken within him, and thereby avert self-destruction. What his mind was currently hinting at-- very insistently-- was beyond reason. Will reminded himself that he did not respond to stimuli normally even at the

best of times; Hannibal's unexpected touch was likely due to the encounter with Miriam Lass, the type of interview the man likely had little experience with even as a psychiatrist.

Will drove back to Wolf Trap in silence, thinking of Hannibal's hand flexing at his side as he walked away.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> As always, your comments mean the world to me. It's good encouragement to hear other people enjoy the storyline! I appreciate you reading!

On the 27th, Alana goes straight from the airport to Quantico. Will spends most of his day rereading Ripper case files and listening in on Alana's sessions with Miriam from behind a one-way mirror. The lab ends the day finding nothing of value, but Beverly still leaves with a smile on her face-- they've never been closer, she reminds Will as they exit the building. When Will arrives home, there is a box on his porch: A belated Christmas gift from his aunt in Louisiana-- a handwritten note and the same aftershave she's given him every year since he was sixteen.

The 28th and 29th follow the same schedule, only there is no gift waiting on Will's porch when he finally returns from work. Beverly stops reminding them of how close they are. Like the Ripper's other victims, Miriam Lass may as well have fallen from the sky.

By December 30th, Miriam is permitted to leave the state with her parents; determined as ever, she tells Jack she'll be back for the beginning of the new term in a few days, and Will believes her. Crawford disappears without a word to the team after Miriam is driven away in her crying mother's minivan; Will hopes he and Bella get to finish their Christmas at the cabin-- that Jack doesn't bring the living ghost of Miriam with him.

The melancholy glow of the past week was, possibly, how Will found himself with Beverly and Alana on New Year's Eve, a holiday he particularly loathed.

Around 5 PM on December 31st, Will left his classroom, locked up the case files, and made his way to the lab for a final check-in before heading home. Rounding the corner, he was struck by how dark the corridor was; the lab was ghostly with most of the blaring blue-white lights switched off. There was something uniquely depressing about standing outside a locked lab door in a dark hallway on New Year's Eve. Even someone as glad to brush off social interaction as Will could recognize that. As Will turned to leave-- to go home to his dogs and a bowl of cereal for dinner-- he heard a woman's laugh bounce down the hall. Soon, a second laugh joined it. Will followed the sound.

In an alcove of the adjacent hall-- a sitting area used for guests waiting outside the agents' offices-- he found Beverly, Alana, and a bottle of sparkling wine. Seeing Will, they laughed again, looking more like caught teenage girls than the incredibly competent women they were. It was good to see-- the two had taken the last week to heart, feeling like they had been part of the FBI's complete inability to protect Miriam Lass.

“Will! Join us!” Alana called out sounding happier than he had heard her in at least a month. Will glanced at the bottle and saw that it was partially full; only the two plastic cups in the women’s hands had been poured out.

“Are we celebrating something?” Will asked, his eyebrows raised.

“We’re celebrating our failures,” Beverly replied. She poured him a cup of the wine and held it out. He took it and sat heavily in a seat near the other two.

“You didn’t fail,” Will firmly asserted. “This is what the Ripper does.”

“I must’ve missed something on one of the bodies. It’s impossible-- *he’s* impossible,” Beverly stated, angry with herself. She took a long swig of her drink.

“I’m looking forward to classes starting again,” Alana said to the ceiling, her head falling back in a portrait of weariness. “That’s how bad this is.”

The three fell into a quiet lull for a few moments, drinking their sparkling wine and dwelling on their own perceived shortcomings.

“So, this is how normal people celebrate New Year’s Eve?” Will inquired, eyes watching the bubbles in his plastic cup. Dry sarcasm coated every word.

Alana laughed and Beverly rolled her eyes, a smile on her face. It wasn’t the worst way to spend the evening.

“I’m avoiding ‘normal’ people as long as I can,” Beverly answered. “My parents always have a countdown-- all of the kids come back home and eat junk food.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Will commented.

“My younger sister moved in with them last month. I’d say she’ll be drunk by--” Beverly made a show of checking her watch “--two hours ago.”

Will gave a wry smile at her grimace.

“Speaking of normal, I should go,” Alana said with a reluctant sigh. “I have a ticket to the Baltimore City Community Foodbank fundraiser gala.”

“Swanky,” Beverly remarked and took another sip. “I’m not enough of a lady for *galas*.”

“My college roommate is in town. It was a good idea a few weeks ago-- not so much tonight. I should’ve asked you to go with me, Will,” Alana responded, and looked over at the man.

“People often associate me with galas,” Will muttered.

Alana grinned at him and replied, “That’s why I should’ve invited you. You would’ve snuck out with me-- there’s nothing like a fast food dinner in an evening gown.”

Will gave a single laugh through his nose. In an alternate universe somewhere, Will was wearing a stuffy suit and counting down the minutes until he could take Alana-- breathtakingly pretty, no doubt-- to get greasy burgers and fries. He liked the image, but that wasn't his universe anymore.

Alana continued, "Last year, Hannibal invited me to go with him. He didn't appreciate the suggestion."

Will detected a note of bitterness in Alana's voice, but it would've been hard to hear if he didn't know the context of Alana and Hannibal's relationship. She was better at hiding her feelings than Will gave her credit for.

"Forget Graham. If French fries are part of the gala package, I'm in," Beverly jokingly offered.

"Next year-- you, me, and two double cheeseburgers," Alana agreed. She stood and stretched her neck. Walking out of the square of chairs into the darkened hallway, she said with a warm smile, "Happy New Year. Don't have too much fun without me."

The sound of her heels clicking down the hallway disappeared slowly. When they were entirely gone, Beverly looked at Will inquisitively. It was the same face she wore when she was pulling fibers in the lab. Another flood of the fizzy wine coated Will's throat. Eventually, he sighed and looked at her expectantly.

"You had a look."

Will found himself suddenly thinking too carefully about each tiny movement of his face; he remained as still as possible, a horrified wax figure.

"What would that be?" he asked, distaste evident in his tone.

"Cold is the absence of heat? When Alana mentioned last year's fundraiser, your expression was the absence of emotion."

A scoff came from Will, and he replied, "Shoddy evidence."

"Purposeful nothing isn't nothing," Beverly shot back, a challenging smile.

She wasn't trying to provoke him, just do a little friendly prying. Will forced his body to calm, making the muscles in his limbs and jaw relax, even while his mind rushed to rebuild its defenses.

"You're usually direct," Will poked back, hoping to shorten the interrogation.

"Then what's the story? You were evasive in the car," Beverly questioned, still scrutinizing him.

"I'm often evasive," Will claimed. "There are articles on the topic."

“You told me you aren’t seeing Alana. Friends are a safer subject than dating,” Beverly pointed out.

Will put two fingers to his temple, resting his head.

“I reject all relationships,” he eventually said, swirling the wine around in his glass slowly.

Beverly wisely didn’t speak, waiting for Will to go on. Will knew this game-- he was very good at it-- but he also knew he had begun to enjoy Beverly’s company, a rare gem for Will to find in an otherwise rocky terrain. He had no desire to lash at her, push her off her questioning with a biting remark; he similarly had no desire to share anything resembling his full, convoluted feelings about Alana and Hannibal. He avoided therapy for a reason.

“I don’t have much practice being close to people,” Will vaguely answered her.

Will let silence fill the gaps between their conversation, and eventually, Beverly conceded.

“Give yourself a break. There isn’t a secret playbook,” she replied with a kinder voice, her eyes no longer cutting into him. She raised her cup to her lips for another sip, and Will followed suit.

“What about your sister?” Will asked.

Beverly let out a groan that spoke of decades of shepherding a younger sibling while wondering how the hell she was still alive.

“Lacie,” Beverly named, shaking her head. “I had to bail her out of jail once. Our parents were out of town. Lacie threw her purse at a police officer giving her a field sobriety test. She was seventeen.”

The image of Beverly, already no-nonsense in her early twenties, made Will chuckle as much as the idea of a wobbly seventeen-year-old girl trying to go toe-to-toe with an officer.

“She’s probably asleep under the kitchen table by now,” Beverly added. “I should go, too. Mom will be upset if I don’t show.”

They tossed their plastic cups-- not entirely empty-- and the bottle into a trashcan; Will tied it off and took the bag out; he didn’t think anyone would appreciate the office smelling boozy. He tossed the bag into the dumpster tucked behind the building and went home.

Will let out his dogs and poured two fingers of whiskey. He stayed on his porch, coat pulled tight around his body, drinking the warming liquid and watching the dogs run and roll around, make demented snow angels. He upgraded his dinner from cereal to crackers and cheese, drank a glass of water to stave off the mild hangover sparkling wine tended to give him in any quantity, and was in bed by 11:30. He wouldn’t mind if future New Year’s Eves were celebrated like this.

For the first night since his last encounter with Hannibal in the parking lot following Miriam’s return, Will didn’t dream of hands and symphonies; he dreamed of sailing on a

white sea. When he woke up and showered, he didn't feel the need to turn the knob until the water ran cold. It was a relief.

Still, because the day was Wednesday, Hannibal was present in Will's life from the moment Will woke up. He had consciously not thought about what today's meeting might look like; it was easier to completely forget the blurry dreams that made his face and chest run hot if he didn't allow his waking mind more than a few seconds of consideration. Will's past nightmares were evidence that dreams could not be controlled, but that latitude didn't extend to daydreams, so he kept a tight leash on his traitorous imagination. The best-case scenario for the evening was that Will would spend an utterly unremarkable few hours having dinner with Hannibal-- maybe comparing Will's three-person commiseration session with the food bank gala-- and leave feeling nothing but full.

It wasn't entirely intentional that Will wore one of his oldest flannel shirts to Hannibal's home, a shirt that bordered on being relegated to the pile of clothing only chosen if oil stains were a possibility. He did, however, skip the aftershave; he didn't hate the man. Before leaving, he slipped his glasses on over his eyes, a final barrier.

Hannibal opened the door looking similar to how he had the week before-- button-down, slacks, and a crisp apron. His face was fixed in its normal expression-- a placid enjoyment of life offset by watchful, intelligent eyes.

"Will, come in," he said, letting Will pass. Will was careful not to make contact as he entered. This wasn't so much a social visit as a survival challenge.

"What's on the menu?" he asked casually, walking with Hannibal toward the kitchen.

"Roast pork belly with coriander plum sauce. Plums are not in season; they were an experiment in canning." Hannibal looked over at him and added, "I trust you will tell me if I have failed."

"My pleasure," Will answered.

Walking into the dining room, Will was surprised to find the table already set and the meal finished. He glanced questioningly at Hannibal, who was untying the apron and making his way around the table to sit.

"I hope you don't mind missing a lesson. Alana told me she left you and Ms. Katz with a bottle of sparkling wine. I wasn't entirely certain what state you would arrive in," Hannibal responded with a look up from under his brows, eyes amused.

Will sat down at the table with a small frown and replied sarcastically, "Sorry to disappoint."

"No disappointment. I was surprised to hear of your socializing," Hannibal stated, his eyes downcast to his plate as he cut into the crisp surface of the pork belly. In a rather pleased voice, he continued, "I find you often surprise me." He glanced up at Will as he took the first bite.

Will hadn't yet laid a tine on his food; he fiddled with the fork and knife, passing them over each other without letting the metal instruments touch. His agitation made even the artfully prepared dish in front of him unappealing. He imagined the feeling of fatty flesh between his teeth and suppressed a gag. Becoming ill at Hannibal's dinner table was not the kind of surprise the man was referring to. Will put his silverware down and placed his hands on his thighs.

"How was the gala?" Will asked, concentrating on the glistening surface of the deep red plum sauce.

"I enjoyed the ambience. The company was somewhat lacking," he replied, not looking up from the piece of meat he was carving into.

Will chuckled at the thought of Hannibal being the most elitist person in a room full of Baltimore socialites. Feigning sympathy, Will questioned, "Too many people prostrating themselves before you?"

"More or less," Hannibal answered, the creases around his mouth lifting into a muted smile. "I didn't realize you and Beverly had become friendly."

Picking up the silverware to try again, Will explained, "We're not friends."

"But you see the possibility for friendship?"

"More or less," Will echoed Hannibal's words back to him. The other man's mouth raised a little more at the caustic tone.

After a few more bites, Hannibal spoke again.

"You seem unsteady this evening. Care to tell me why?" he inquired directly, edging small talk out of the conversation.

Will exhaled a huff of air and cut a piece of pork belly off. He chewed slowly, unsure if he could stomach anything yet. The first bite down, he again felt like he might be able to handle the evening without clawing out of his own skin-- torn between friendship and resentment, understanding and confusion, cold and shameful heat.

"Not particularly," Will replied, sure Hannibal would appreciate the honesty over a half-baked lie.

"Very well," the other man said in response, though he watched Will more intently now between bites. Just because his words agreed to drop it didn't mean the man himself did. "Miriam Lass?"

Will shook his head, then explained, "We've got nothing. No fibers to lead us to a location, no skin, no hair, no memories."

"You did what you could," Hannibal offered, a fact instead of a comfort.

Will gripped the silverware tighter in his hands thinking about Miriam as he said, “I need to understand why he let her go. Why now? Why at all?”

“It could have been unintentional. We don’t know it was the Chesapeake Ripper who threw the rope to her,” Hannibal suggested.

Will sighed out a harsh breath and replied, “No, it’s him. Who sees a woman in a pit-- with half an arm missing-- and tosses her a rope? He needed to be sure he was gone by the time she made it up.”

Hannibal tossed out another idea, “He may have grown fond of her. They were together for two years.”

It was an overly simplistic suggestion from Hannibal; Will wouldn’t have expected him to posit it.

“A monster with a heart of gold?” Will snidely summed up the theory.

“I’ll defer to your judgment,” Hannibal said back, no sign of defensiveness or insult.

Will desperately did not want to discuss Miriam Lass further, so he switched to another case: “Freddie Lounds was reported missing.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows rose and, just before popping another bite in his mouth, he rhetorically asked, “Someone misses Freddie Lounds?”

“Someone has noticed her absence,” Will corrected, not giving Hannibal the smile he was aiming for.

“She’ll return,” Hannibal asserted confidently. “With Miriam Lass alive and walking among us, I’d expect Ms. Lounds to appear at the next Ripper scene.”

“Unless Freddie finally pushed someone too far,” Will added harshly. “That’s her calling card, after all.”

During their back-and-forth about Miriam and Freddie, Will had made himself take quick bites, not wanting his lack of appetite to draw attention. He glanced down and saw with relief that his plate was nearly empty.

“Do you think Miriam’s release is the Ripper announcing his return?” Will questioned, interested enough in the possibility to bring the woman back up.

“As I said, I’ll defer to your judgment,” Hannibal repeated his words from earlier. “But it would be a rather poetic way to start another *sounder*, as you say.”

“I have no judgment where the Ripper is concerned. That has become clear over the past week,” Will muttered in frustration.

Hannibal looked at him warmly, affectionately even, and assured, “You’ll figure it out. You’re the one, Will. It’ll come to you.”

Will's head dropped a bit, his eyes scanning the table in front of him.

"I have no such faith," he said quietly.

"It's not faith; faith is subject to the whims of a mercurial god. You need only trust yourself," Hannibal mused.

Will didn't respond, and Hannibal didn't speak further on the topic.

Will finished the last few bites on his plate, Hannibal already through. They cleared the table together, falling into the established rhythm of their cooking lessons. In the kitchen, Will went toward the sink, filling his normal role in their clean-up process. It was odd to think of the situation in that way-- having a normal role in someone else's home, their kitchen, their life. A role to slip into without thought or negotiation. He was letting the hot water run into a tub used for pre-washing when Hannibal came up beside him, reached around, and turned off the faucet.

For all of Will's careful distancing and attention to his own movements, he could not control what the other man did or how close he came-- and Hannibal felt impossibly close at that second. The side of Hannibal's chest right before the crook of his shoulder was against Will's arm, washcloth still in his hand. Hannibal looked at him sidelong as he put his hand over Will's to remove the rag. Will didn't move a muscle-- didn't blink or breathe-- as the cloth was released. With the fabric gone, Hannibal's hand remained on Will's, lightly covering it. Will's stomach clenched while the rest of his body felt too loose, too warm; he could feel his heartbeat and the heat emanating from the person standing beside him. Every nerve in his hand and arm fired electric sparks in reaction to the touch. He forced himself to breathe, but it was shallow and moved his chest too noticeably up and down.

"You weren't the chef-- this is my responsibility," Hannibal said in a low, thick voice.

Will tried to sound unaffected but failed miserably when he lamely replied, "It's only polite."

Hannibal's thumb ran over the top of Will's hand from his wrist to the first knuckle of his index finger. It was a feather-light touch, but it left a trail of burning flesh in its wake.

"Your manners have never been the best part of you," he answered, just above a whisper

Will was overly warm and just a grade below panic now; it was a feverish feeling. He thought of the encephalitis; when he thought of the illness now, it was impossible not to think of Hannibal bringing stacks of containers to his room every night. There was a deeper attachment underlying the current flaring chemicals, a thought too painful and lovely to consider at the moment.

After a few long seconds, he asked, "What is...the best part of me?"

"You have a beautiful mind and glorious potential," Hannibal answered without hesitation, as though the words had always been waiting on his tongue. Later on, Will would turn those words inside out in his thoughts, picking them apart and putting them back together again. In the moment, however, he barely heard them.

They let another few eternal seconds pass as they stood together, unmoving except for the rise and fall of chests.

Will swallowed hard and said, “I should…”

“Go?” Hannibal supplied. Will didn’t answer.

At the silence, Hannibal took a step back, breaking the contact. He looked at the hallway leading from the kitchen to the entrance. In the voice of a good host, he said, “I’ll see you out, if you believe you need to leave. You’re welcome to stay.”

A significant chunk of Will did not, in fact, believe he needed to leave. The impulse he felt was much more base-- a tactile experience. He wanted to touch and be touched. He wanted the electricity in his limbs-- the same type that had rushed down his neck and chest at the symphony-- to wash over his entire body until he was numb to it. He wanted to be close enough to smell the soap and cologne on the nape of the man’s neck; he wanted to feel the clothing, which probably cost as much as Will’s vehicle, fall loosely from a solid body. He didn’t want to go home and dream.

Will’s legs led him to the doorway.

“As always, it was good to see you, Will,” Hannibal remarked, not looking Will squarely in the eyes.

“Yeah. See you next week,” Will answered, half as a test. *Would* he see the other man a week from then?

“Of course,” Hannibal smiled back with closed lips. There was still a warm glow to his eyes, a sincerity not often seen in the private man.

Will made it around the block-- out of sight of Hannibal’s doorstep-- before he had to pull over to collect himself.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Thank you again for your words and discussion. I love to see what you all think and hope you have some fun reading!

During the final minutes of Will's last class on Monday-- the first day of the new term-- Jack Crawford came to stand in the doorway, his imposing figure surrounded by the glow of the hallway lights. Will finished the slideshow, did not ask if there were any questions, and dismissed the trainees. They gave Agent Crawford a wide berth on their way out.

"Jack," Will acknowledged the man, adjusting his glasses.

"Abel Gideon has escaped," Jack stated, no patience for even the pretense of niceties at the moment. "He was being transported for a court hearing. Killed three people."

"Any idea where he might go?" Will asked, knowing the answer.

Jack looked at Will like a prize bloodhound, and Will supposed he wasn't too far from the truth.

"I thought you could help with that," Jack answered.

Will dropped his head while he packed up his bag. A note of frustration in his voice, he said, "Couldn't have waited until the second day of classes."

Jack's face didn't show any sympathy when he replied, "He left us a gift."

Will's heart began to pump a little faster at the thought. He didn't ask Jack what it was but haphazardly tossed the remaining papers from his desk into his bag and looked up at the agent. Jack didn't speak when he turned, expecting Will to follow him; he did.

The landscape was crawling with investigators when they arrived at the spot on a backroad where a transport van was pulled wildly into the snow. The nucleus of the crime scene, however, was a tree surrounded by crimson-dappled snow; organs hanging from veins were attached to the limbs like nightmarish Christmas decorations. Will was entranced by the image-- a postapocalyptic bush burning in the desert. As soon as the SUV stopped, Will was out of the vehicle, eyes wandering along each branch. Standing between the open back doors of the van and the tree, he didn't need the scene cleared to fall backward into the visions his mind crafted.

Eyes closed, his mind went black then reemerged in the rear of the transport van hours earlier:

All I need is to get one hand free. I dislocate my thumb and remove the handcuff. The officer is too slow to stop me. I kill him. I overpower the nurse and stab her throat; blood sprays across the van. I am almost free from the vehicle; I will not yet be free from what has been done to me. The driver has to stop. I am ready for him to open the doors; he is not ready for me. I cannot let the bodies go to waste-- the Chesapeake Ripper would not squander such an opportunity. I leave all of the organs; I both am and am not him. I don't know what I am.

Will opened his eyes, the sun brighter than in his memory. Jack's booming voice broke into his thoughts, "Does Gideon still believe he's the Chesapeake Ripper?"

"Meet Abel Gideon's identity crisis," Will answered with a sweep of his hand.

"Is he dissociative? This is theatre-- more Ripper than Gideon."

Will shook his head in disagreement, "This is Gideon's reimagining of the Ripper. He left the organs. Even if the Ripper was traveling on foot, he'd take something. It would feel...incomplete. Inelegant."

"If he's not the Ripper, he's hoping this will flush him out," Jack tossed out, furrowing his heavy brow.

The two men walked toward the tree, the three bodies from the transport van arranged delicately at its base. Beverly, Price, and Zeller worked the scene, spread out among the gore. Beverly caught sight of Jack and Will and approached them.

"He took a uniform, police radio, two nine millimeter handguns, pepper spray, taser and handcuffs," she informed them.

From across the tree, Jimmy called out, "He even tied little bows with the popliteal veins!"

Zeller looked more closely at a spleen and remarked, "Oh, I see it now. I can't get regular ribbon to stay tied."

Beverly continued her debrief, "Local PDs found a foot trail, two to three hours old. It was headed back to Baltimore."

Jack and Will exchanged looks, suspecting what his first stop might be.

"I have a manhunt to organize and you--" he glanced at Will "--have a date with a psychiatrist. Frederick Chilton won't be happy to see you."

"Your accuser killing three people then disappearing constitutes a good day for Dr. Chilton," Will retorted with a frown.

The men got back into the vehicle and returned to Quantico, their paths compelling them in different directions.

A few hours later, Will and Alana found themselves standing in front of Frederick Chilton's desk, the good doctor sitting behind it with an air of piousness. His hands were interlaced

tightly, and his chain was raised a bit too high. Will wanted to drive his fist into the exposed jaw.

“I suppose this is my fault, too?” the man asked derisively. “You’ll be accusing me of organizing his escape soon.”

“You have benefitted from his rapidly disintegrating mental health,” Will replied, face tense and barely concealing his outright anger.

“Nobody's accusing you of that,” Alana smoothed.

Chilton leaned back in his plush leather seat and scoffed, a high-pitched complaint ringing through the breathy sound.

“There’s enough blame to go around, Dr. Bloom. You deserve a rather substantial slice of this particular pie. You planted the suggestion I was manipulating Gideon,” Chilton said haughtily, obviously accepting no blame himself.

“Gideon indicated you were,” Alana answered in a neutral tone.

“Through no suggestion of your own, I’m sure,” Frederick huffed. “Gideon has been manipulating you from the beginning. We can confirm he has killed four people *while in custody*. He *thanked* me for helping him discover himself. It is absolutely ludicrous to question if he is the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Abel Gideon is not the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will harshly corrected, voice closer to a growl than human speech. “You may have convinced him for a time, but I am under no such illusions. Before long, Gideon won’t be either.”

Before Chilton had a chance to offer his rebuttal, Alana interjected, “It doesn’t matter if he is or isn't the Ripper. What matters at this moment is he will kill again.”

“Abel Gideon would be a terribly heavy albatross, Dr. Bloom,” Frederick lilted patronizingly. “Can’t imagine how you would manage to keep your head so high above the rest of us with that around your neck.”

Alana’s body radiated indignation when she replied simply, “No heavier than the nurse he killed. Your nurse.”

Will broke in, the escalating tension wasting precious minutes, “What does Abel Gideon want?”

Chilton’s eyes shifted between Alana and Will, contempt for both written across his face.

Leaning forward like a teacher speaking to a small child, he responded, “Last thing Abel Gideon said to me was he intended to tell everyone he’s the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“He’s off to a good start,” Will mused aloud to himself. “Thank you for your time, Frederick.”

Chilton bristled at the casualness of his name in Will's mouth. Will and Alana exited before he had a chance to engage them again. Outside the building, Alana's lips were in a single line, her cheekbones more prominent in her soft face; she was fuming. Will put a gloved hand on the shoulder of her scarlet red coat. She looked at him, eyes still seeing Frederick Chilton.

"Alana, he was trying to get under your skin," Will said in a voice a degree warmer than usual.

"It worked," she snapped. "He's found a speciality in unethical psychiatry."

"You were the only advocating for Abel Gideon. You did your job," he replied honestly. Alana knew his words weren't hollow.

"But Frederick did his better," she shot back, letting her gaze drop as she lost herself in thought.

Will shifted on his feet before saying in a firmer voice, "I'm going to ask Jack to give you an armed escort." Alana looked at him with widened eyes, anger flaring again. He went on, "Gideon was already overly interested in you before any of this. We can't know if Chilton planted ideas about you in his mind."

Alana crossed her arms over her chest and took a deep breath in and out. She looked less angry at Will's explanation, but concern was now draining the color from her cheeks.

"The tracks we found at the crime scene were leading back to Baltimore," Will added, a detail he wasn't sure she was aware of. Alana didn't like being kept in the dark; she needed all of the details at her disposal to accept the security Will knew he could talk Jack into providing. Begrudgingly, he supposed he ought to request the same for Frederick Chilton.

On his drive home, Will called Jack and made his request; as expected, the agent agreed with Will's cautious assessment of the situation. Alana would have an officer meet her at her door and Jack would contact Chilton with an identical offer. It was the best they could do.

Will felt like he and Jack had been in unwinnable positions too often recently-- Tobias Budge, Miriam Lass, and now Abel Gideon. All three felt like failures. The memory of the struggle with Tobias was still vivid when Will replayed it on the reel in his mind; the other man would have killed him and Hannibal both without hesitation. He walked into the office that day knowing his own death was a possibility-- it was hard to regret killing someone who had all but given his permission for it to occur. The burden of Tobias Budge's murder stemmed not from the guilt of a mortal sin but the fear that it reflected something within himself that was darker than Will knew how to acknowledge and leash.

Will kept his phone close, but no messages or calls from Jack came through that evening. He wondered where Abel was hiding in the cold Maryland night. In bed with his eyes closed, Will tried to channel Abel Gideon; what he received was static. It was possible that was all Abel Gideon had to offer at the moment-- maybe he had successfully gotten into the man's frame of mind after all. He dreamed of an eternal cage; he could not see the bars, but he could see their reflections on the snow.

At 8 AM, Will sat in the waiting room of Dr. Barry Russell's office at long last. At 11 AM, he exited the office, the elderly doctor-- who Will had discovered was hard of hearing and had multiple framed tropical prints covering his office walls-- ushered Will back out, finishing a story about his twelve-year-old granddaughter's diving competition. Will laughed gamely. He hadn't lied during the evaluation so much as made himself more pleasant for the doctor whose mind was already lying on a lounge chair in Florida; he had been determined when he told Jack he would not go through this process again. There were tricks Will had learned through his life-- survival tools originally but now more nuanced in their use. Even now, Will had to actively combat the tendency to mimic others-- a visible side effect of his extreme empathy; however, when he allowed himself to embrace the inclination, he found it a form of magic. People responded more positively to those whose body language and voice mirrored their own; it was only a matter of using the talent strategically. It was easier for the doctor to believe him; it was easier for the doctor to pass him. Will created for Dr. Russell the path of least resistance, and the man seemed to take it.

When the cold winter air swept across his face, he released the spirit of Dr. Russell, feeling exhausted from absorbing the personality of another without losing himself. His phone had three missed calls and a handful of text messages-- all from Jack. The messages strung together enough information for Will to gather Abel Gideon had left another present; the final message was an address. Will replied that he was on the way.

The address was for a complex of offices housed within an august restored Victorian home. The name "Dr. Carruthers" was etched on the frosted glass window of the open door; within, the BAU team was already at work. The body had been left as it was found until Will could arrive.

Agent Crawford's gaze met Will at the doorway and stoically reported, "Paul Carruthers. The doctor wrote an article for the *Journal of Criminal Psychology* describing Gideon as a pathological narcissist who suffers from psychotic episodes. Cleaning service found him this morning around 5 AM."

Carruthers stared blankly at the ceiling, his flesh ghostly white; the man's tongue laid as a necktie over his throat, and two empty IV stands flanked him.

"His theory wasn't wrong," Will remarked. "Probably why Gideon killed him."

"This isn't just getting the Chesapeake Ripper's attention," Jack agreed. "He drained him first-- left four and a half liters of blood on ice with a note: Please deliver to the Red Cross."

"Hope he got a cookie," Jimmy said with a sympathetic look at the corpse.

"Gideon's mind was rearranged by doctors until he couldn't find his way through it anymore. He's using his own skills to rearrange their bodies. The extra touches-- those are for the Ripper," Will concluded. He didn't need to go inside himself to envision how this crime played out and why Gideon acted as he did.

Jack nodded and said decisively, "I'm putting a detail on Alana and Chilton's homes and offices."

The man turned, phone out in his hand, to arrange the extra security. Examining the body of Paul Carruthers, Will could feel Gideon's disdain along with something else-- emerging clarity. Just as the man had been in two different frames of mind when he wrecked the transport and when he decorated the tree with organs, he was in an entirely different headspace for this murder, as well. Gideon knew his purpose for killing, and he knew enough to believe the Ripper was someone yet to be uncovered. He may well have started the murder still questioning if he might be the Ripper, but the outlandishly smarmy choice to leave the blood in a cooler for the Red Cross was a call begging to be answered. Gideon was looking for a dialogue; the Ripper left soliloquies.

Nothing more to be said, Will headed to Quantico, hoping to make it to his afternoon classes. He suspected missing the first meeting was bad form for a professor, but also guessed his reputation now preceded him among the incoming students. He ended up being only five minutes late; the students did not have enough time to craft a wild tale that he was tardy because he was killing another suspect. The class came and went, as did the one after it. By the time Will left, the winter sun was sinking slowly below the horizon.

He kept himself busy that evening making fishing lures, Winston curiously watching from his side. Constructing the lures was a ritual to bring back the sun; if his hands were deft enough, it would be summer again, and the sun would not set by 5:30 PM. It hadn't worked yet, but that was not enough reason to quit. The incorporeal form of Abel Gideon sat in one of Will's armchairs as he worked.

You're as confused as I am.

Will ignored him.

At least I admit to enjoying it.

He kept his eyes on the lures.

You can say you liked it. We'll be a happy trio, me, you, and the Ripper.

Will shook his head once, knocking loose the voice in his mind. He knew Gideon; he did not need to live with him to understand his thinking. He left a fan on that night in spite of the cold, the white noise helping keep Gideon at bay; he was not as persistent as Wells had been. Either that or Will was getting better at locking out the intruders.

After Will's morning classes on Wednesday, he went to Jack's office to check in.

"Any news?" he asked, half in the office and half out.

Jack looked down somberly at a stack of photos, mostly of the transport crime scene.

"None. No new bodies-- yet. Alana and Dr. Chilton are both alive as of this morning. Nothing."

Will stayed in the space between the hall and Jack's office as he said, "Try not to sound so glum that Alana is alive."

With an exasperated sigh, Jack put the photos down.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” the man defended unwaveringly.

“Jack, Abel Gideon can’t help himself. He’ll go after one of them,” Will said, the words a promise.

Jack nodded twice, eyes looking at the photos he was no longer touching.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Jack replied. Will heard the words Jack failed to speak: *I’m afraid of another person disappearing under my watch.*

Will closed the door behind him, no way to assure Jack that not every case was going to end up like Miriam’s. In all truth, Will wouldn’t reassure Crawford even if he had the appropriate words because-- just as not all of the people Jack tried to protect would be kidnapped and lose half of a limb-- not all of them would survive either. The comfort was too cold to be worth proffering.

Most of the day, Will locked himself in his classroom and studied the Ripper files. If he wanted to catch the Ripper-- as Hannibal had been so confident he would-- he needed to keep looking. He needed to see both what was there and what wasn’t. He felt as though he was on the cusp of that, but he suspected he would need to fall into the depths to understand. It frightened him to consider that notion. At any rate, reviewing the files couldn’t hurt in the search for the Ripper’s newest fan. Around 5:45 PM, Will tucked the files away and left for Baltimore; he white-knuckled the steering wheel most of the way there.

Hannibal looked far more formal today than he had the last few visits. He had on suit pants and a matching waistcoat the color of mahogany; the deep reddish brown contrasted sharply with his stark white button down and purple patterned tie. Will had seen him like this countless times before-- just back from his office-- but it felt wrong. It was too stiff, too refined; it was a costume. He had seen Hannibal before with his cuffs rolled so that his hands could work swiftly, too lost in cooking to notice his hair was falling just over his forehead; this person wore the same face and clothing as the man Will knew, but it was not Hannibal.

They exchanged their customary greetings, Hannibal welcoming Will into his home. Again, dinner was already on the table by the time Will arrived; last week it had felt like a courtesy, but this week, it felt like a slight. Will would be lying if he said it didn’t sting. Still, Hannibal’s manners were beyond reproach.

“I heard about Dr. Gideon. Has he been consuming your work?” Hannibal asked with restrained curiosity as he spread a cloth napkin over his lap.

“He has. I’ve spent more time in the mind of Abel Gideon than I’d ever imagined,” Will answered, picking up his silverware.

“He must be delighted by that,” Hannibal commented. There was no smile on his face or in his eyes; they were only words. Will wondered how often he convinced people he understood them by saying well-chosen words at precisely the right moment.

“I haven’t had the chance to ask him,” Will responded.

“Abel Gideon cannot stay hidden for long. It’s against his nature.”

Will chewed, swallowed, and tasted nothing.

“He’s not hiding. He’s...soliciting,” Will gritted out.

“What does he seek?” Hannibal inquired, his interest somewhat less disguised.

“The Ripper,” Will said simply, then took another bite.

“He wishes to learn who he is by seeing who he is not,” Hannibal replied. “But first, he will destroy those doctors who led him to this quandary.”

Will glanced up, not looking at Hannibal’s face but landing his gaze somewhere around the man’s tie, glasses obscuring his view.

“Good guess,” he offered.

Hannibal clarified. “Dr. Carruthers’ donation is in the news.”

Will worked his jaw in irritation, then spat, “Local PD gets their five minutes of fame.”

“If Gideon is courting the Ripper, it’s possible he tipped off the journalists,” Hannibal suggested, a better idea than Will wanted to give him credit for at the moment.

“I wish Abel Gideon would leave the Ripper more specific *tips* about where to find him,” Will complained.

Hannibal chewed thoughtfully; then, staring at his dinner knife, he offered, “Abel Gideon is not a subtle man. What was the last place the Chesapeake Ripper is known to have visited?”

The skin on Will’s forehead scrunched in a small scowl as he said, “You think he’s leading the Ripper to the observatory?”

“Attempting to,” Hannibal amended.

“The Ripper can’t like Gideon claiming his kills,” Will challenged. “The last time the media gave him credit, Miriam Lass lost an arm.”

The other man laid his silverware down as he stated, “The Ripper is no more threatened by Abel Gideon than is a hawk by a songbird. Through Miriam Lass, the Ripper has shown his freedom. There is no incentive to pursue Abel Gideon while he is behaving so recklessly.”

“He only has to outlast Gideon,” Will concluded. “Gideon gets caught, the Ripper murders continue, there’s no question who the real killer is.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal answered noncommittally.

Will rose his eyebrows in a question, now considering Abel Gideon more intensely than he had earlier. “Or Gideon escapes, and the Ripper finds him at his own convenience.”

“I think the possibilities are equally likely,” Hannibal said conversationally, as though they were not discussing murderers. Will had still not met his eyes since they first greeted one another at the door.

Thoughts were forming parallel narratives in Will’s mind. One world saw Abel Gideon caught by his own misguided hubris; the other ended with the Ripper pulling a trophy from Abel Gideon’s body. These thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of Will’s phone.

He looked up at Hannibal apologetically as he took the call from Jack.

“Will, Frederick Chilton is missing.”

“He had an armed officer on his porch,” Will pointed out incredulously, as though that fact changed anything.

“And there were two in the transport van. The detail at the hospital said he got in his car safely, but the officers at his home say he never arrived. Nobody can reach him.”

A hand came up to pinch the bridge of Will’s nose while the other clutched his phone tightly. The two security details changed shifts between the hospital and Chilton’s home. The pair of officers who watched his workplace would’ve followed him most of the way home but then overshot it to go back to the station. It would’ve been difficult for Gideon to follow Chilton unnoticed; it would have been far less difficult for Gideon to break into Chilton’s car--housed in a private space in the parking garage, out of sight of the officers watching the main entrance.

“He must’ve been in the car, Jack.”

“Any ideas where they might be headed? We have nothing.”

Will met Hannibal’s eyes then as he answered, “The observatory. I’m on my way.”

The phone call ended, and Will felt a surge of guilt. He didn’t want to leave the house this way.

“Hannibal…”

“You have to go?” the other man intoned with a smile Will knew to be practiced.

Will nodded.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the words sticky in his throat. They weren’t ones he was accustomed to saying.

Hannibal’s contrived smile dropped, and he looked almost sober. Will preferred this real expression to the artifice.

“Your talents are rare. Don’t spend the night tracking Abel Gideon through the snow,” Hannibal chided, still sounding too polite for Will’s liking even with the more authentic look in his eyes.

Will hurriedly made his way out of the home to his vehicle, already knowing that if Abel Gideon ran, he would chase. If Gideon was at the observatory, he owed Hannibal a thanks; he would find a way to even the scales again.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> 💜💜💜💜💜Your comments are amazing, and I'm so glad you all are reading and enjoying.💜💜💜💜💜

Will pulled his car off the road before the observatory came into sight. Unarmed, he had to wait for Jack to arrive. He tapped his fingers on the bottom of the steering wheel and watched the time slowly creep forward on his cell phone. When he saw headlights in the distance that flipped off too soon, he knew it was time. Jack Crawford exited his SUV, and Will hurried to meet him.

“Let’s go,” Crawford spoke in low tones, eyes looking toward the drive leading up to the building.

They walked swiftly up the paved pathway, surveying the structure. An ostentatious new red Jaguar was parked near the walkway; Will couldn’t have picked a better car for Frederick Chilton-- he probably had a collection of them. Jack radioed for backup at the sight. The two men shot each other a look, silently agreeing to proceed in spite of the risk. The door was cracked open but still creaked when they entered; Will stayed a few feet behind Jack as they crept in.

Wisps of light streaming from a room off the main floor drew them forward. The sight that greeted them was more unexpected than finding a corpse: Frederick Chilton, alive, lay sliced open and hand pumping his own respirator. There were multiple empty stainless steel kidney basins on an elevated tray. There was no question Gideon’s surgery had been interrupted.

Will rushed forward to take the pump from Chilton’s weakly squeezing hand. It was a twisted test-- Chilton only remaining alive if he stayed alert for as much of the torture as possible. Jack was calling for an ambulance somewhere behind Will, his voice disappearing along with his footsteps as he, no doubt, tried to find Abel Gideon. He couldn’t be far-- Frederick Chilton would not have lived long relying on his trembling hand.

Watching Chilton struggle to breathe while his innards floated in and out of view through the incision, Will remained silent. There was nothing he could say to Chilton that would make any difference now. He looked into Chilton’s half-closed eyes and willed the dazed man to take another breath. The sound of sirens was the most beautiful melody Will had heard, and he was all too happy to turn the responsibility for Chilton’s life over to the determined team trying to control the damage enough to transport Frederick somewhere he could get intensive treatment.

The medics in control inside the observatory, Will jogged outside to find Jack. The man was nowhere to be found, but the officers arriving on the scene were heading toward a patch of forest. Will started to walk after them, then halted in his tracks. Abel Gideon was no fool, and if the most obvious tracks led to that expanse of trees, Will would bet he had cut off somewhere or backtracked after Jack first pursued him. Will scanned the tree line opposite where the officers were going, looking for a sign of life; he saw none, so he walked in a few yards without turning on his flashlight. He heard the sound of rustling brush far out from where he stood; it stopped too abruptly, too cleanly for Will to be convinced it was an animal.

Will moved carefully through the dark woods, going further and further from the light. The anticipation filling his body kept out the cold, and every footfall was measured with attention to the brush below him. He was still at a disadvantage, the faint light coming from behind him, illuminating him for anyone looking outward from the trees. He was almost parallel with Gideon before he realized it. He saw a flash of movement and whipped his head to the side in response; consequently, the heavy crashing sounds of a figure retreating further into the woods sounded next to him. On instinct, Will followed the noise, dodging fallen limbs to join the path Gideon was carving for them; he noticed the trail was starting to run crosswise--toward the road.

He fumbled with his phone, wishing he had a radio, and called Jack. He shouted where he was without listening to the other man and hung up; he couldn't let Gideon out of sight. Will picked up the pace, sacrificing being lashed by branches for the chance to gain on the other man. Within a few seconds, they were running nearly side-by-side, Will rounding to overtake him. He swiped a hand out blindly, came back empty, tried again, and caught Gideon in an iron grip by the coat collar. The man stumbled backward, thrown off balance by the hold and the slick snow. In a second, Will was over him, a heavy stick in his hand he didn't remember picking up. When Abel Gideon tried to sit up, Will swatted him back down, acting on sheer impulse. The man held his hands up defensively on the ground as he started to laugh.

"Agent Graham, you are a live wire, aren't you? The articles were right. Never believe gossip myself," Gideon bitterly said between pants. He once more tried to sit up, earning him another thwack. Will felt powerless within his own skin, his muscles and mind operating on separate wavelengths.

Gideon only laughed harder. The sound of Jack Crawford calling out as he headed their way drew both men's attention, but neither looked away from one another.

"Gonna finish the job?" Gideon snidely asked, blood coming from his nose.

Will's breathing and heart were steadily slowing but still rapid from the exertion. In that moment of halted movement, his mind regained leverage over his body. He considered Abel Gideon: A man who murdered his wife and her family at a holiday table. A man who killed four innocent people whom he had no reason to hate. A man whose murders were gaudy interpretations of a more exquisite mind. A man who, if arrested, would spend the rest of his aimless life taunting hospital employees and vying for media attention.

Abel Gideon should die. The utter truth of that conclusion in Will's mind summoned the most beautiful quiet. There was no debate.

Jack Crawford called again, closer now. He would be there soon-- too soon-- and the consequences of killing Gideon began to intrude on the peace that came from returning to the same space Will had occupied when he killed Tobias Budge. It was wrong to kill someone with officers on their way; it was unnecessary force, and Will would lose the sliver of the world he had claimed as his own over the last few months.

A wave of relief washed over him as Will's lightning-fast mindl recognized the solution to his dilemma had already been provided to him hours earlier. His options weren't solely killing Abel Gideon or arresting him; a third option existed that spared Will but did not spare the other man. If Will let Abel go-- let him escape-- there was another in the world who would pick up where Will left off.

Will called back to Jack, "Over here!" As he yelled, he looked slightly back toward where Jack and the other officers were plodding through the snowy forest. It was enough for Gideon to knock Will off balance; expecting this, Will tried to land with minimal impact. He rolled over and got up to his knees swiftly, but Gideon was already running again, the sounds of the pursuing officers approaching rapidly now. Will called out again from his kneeling position. He pointed the officers in the right direction, but he was confident Gideon would adjust course at the sound of breaking branches.

"You okay?" Jack asked as he passed.

Will nodded, and he felt blood trickle down his face, a remnant from his initial chase through whipping limbs.

"Good instinct, Will-- we'll get him," Jack assured and was on his way again.

Will followed behind the search team, feeling numb from the inside out. Watching the bouncing beams from flashlights and the shadowy forms of officers navigating brush, he struggled to comprehend what he had done. He saved his own life and job, but he'd knowingly delivered a fugitive to the Ripper. He and the unknown murderer were judge, jury, and executioner; there was no way to tell how many others might die in the span of time between Will's sentencing and the Ripper carrying it out. The choice had been made in seconds, and in the moment, it had been made without doubt. Doubt was much easier to come by without Abel Gideon lying between Will's feet.

The team-- including Will-- searched the woods for hours, their faces turning red in the cold. Around 2 AM, the men started going back toward the observatory, too chilled and too defeated to continue. Will and Jack made it until just after 3 AM; by the end of the search, Will realized he was looking for Gideon earnestly, trying to fix his mistake. If Will looked distant as he finally exited the woods, nobody noticed; they all looked forlorn and miserable in their own ways. Only in his car, the heat struggling to run, did Will start to feel the bone-deep cold. With shaking hands and a racing mind, he returned to Baltimore.

He rang Hannibal's doorbell at 4 AM, an ungodly hour in the Mid-Atlantic winter. When Hannibal opened the door, there was a moment of mutual dismay: Will had not truly thought about his actions as he drove, and part of him didn't expect an answer; Hannibal was understandably concerned to see Will, shaking and his face bleeding, on his doorstep before dawn.

“Will, what happened?” Hannibal asked, his eyes going sharp. He was already moving out of the doorway, a hand going to Will’s shoulder to usher him in.

“I chased Abel Gideon through the snow,” Will said in a shallow voice, an attempt to stop the trembling from reaching his speech. He didn’t want to sound as unhinged as he must look in the moment.

The corners of Hannibal’s mouth marginally dropped in a frown at hearing Will had done exactly what he had advised him not to do. When he spoke again, it was the voice of a physician, “Your clothes are damp-- they need to be changed.”

With that, Hannibal started walking up the staircase toward the bedrooms; he glanced at Will, a command to follow. He pointed Will to the guest room he had stayed in weeks before, the night Hannibal realized he was sick. Will waited there for a few short minutes until Hannibal appeared with articles of clothing in his hands and a canvas bag draped over his arm.

Handing Will the bag, he said in the same doctorly tone, “For your clothing. And these--” he handed him the dry clothes “--should be sufficient. You need warmth and fluids; I’ll make tea.”

Hannibal exited the room, and Will stripped off the wet layers holding the cold against his skin. His flesh was red in large patches, the most significant across his thighs. The gray sweater Hannibal gave him was soft against his skin, though it hung a bit too loosely on his frame. He noticed with curiosity that the pants looked like thick black cotton pajama bottoms; when he saw the tie waist, he understood why. Hannibal probably didn’t own anything that wasn’t perfectly bespoke other than sleepwear. The black socks were possibly the best part-- he hadn’t realized how icy his feet were until they began to thaw. Will wiggled all of his fingers and toes, just to be sure he hadn’t legitimately harmed himself. Before going downstairs, he ducked into the restroom to inspect his wounds. They were all fairly shallow-- scratches, really-- but the dried blood made them look worse. He washed his face with warm water and hand soap.

He took the canvas bag with him downstairs and dropped it by the doorway. Then, he wandered into the kitchen, following the sounds of life in the dark home; Hannibal looked up as soon as he crossed the threshold. The man picked up a heavy throw blanket he had draped over the chair in the corner, and Will accepted it without a fight. Will wrapped it around his body and took a sip of the tea Hannibal slid his way. A glass of room-temperature water followed, as did a buttered slice of toast.

“Regulating body temperature expends considerable energy,” Hannibal said as an explanation.

Until the first bite, Will did not think he was hungry. He inhaled the toast and the tea, warming from the inside out. When only crumbs remained, Hannibal refilled the teacup and began asking Will questions, pulling out ingredients for breakfast as he did so.

“Was Dr. Gideon at the observatory?”

“Yes. You were right,” Will answered, trying to sound grateful even though it pained him to admit it.

“Did he have another patient?” Hannibal asked, cracking eggs into a ceramic mixing bowl.

“Frederick Chilton,” Will responded. Hannibal paused for a second, two halves of an eggshell in his hand.

“Has Dr. Chilton survived?” he questioned, resuming his task.

“I don’t know. He was cut open and pumping his own respirator. He was alive when the ambulance took him,” Will described, remembering the man’s glazed eyes.

Hannibal whisked as he commented, “Frederick has never struck me as a man to die easily. His regard for himself is much too high to let such a thing happen.”

Will relaxed at the dark humor-- a hint that Hannibal, too, was thawing from his own freeze.

“Are you going to ask me if I caught Gideon?” Will prodded, becoming anxious to speak while he had the desire to do so.

Hannibal did not look curious. He eventually responded, “If you’d caught Gideon, you wouldn’t be at my door before sunrise.”

A jab of guilt cramped Will’s stomach; he had intruded on Hannibal’s life, and now the man was stuck playing doctor to ensure Will’s health.

“It was wrong of me to come like this,” Will said, shifting under the blanket, preparing to make a hasty exit.

Hannibal’s gaze caught him, though, and arrested his motion.

“Only an observation. You’re welcome in my home,” Hannibal assured, his brow lifting in the suggestion of a smile. He pulled out a cutting board and began chopping an onion while Will settled back in.

“I did catch him,” Will admitted after many minutes spent listening to the sound of the knife on the wooden block. “And then I let him go.”

Hannibal glanced away from the pepper he was now dicing to encourage him to keep talking.

Will shook his head and knit his brow. Rewinding his memory to a few hours earlier, he recalled, “I chased him alone. The officers went the wrong way.”

“But not you,” Hannibal added.

“No, I knew he’d doubled back. He ran; I ran faster. When he went to the ground, I had a stick-- a branch, almost-- in my hand. I don’t even remember picking it up,” Will frowned, eyes far away. “I hit him with it. I wanted…,” Will sighed. There was no point in lying to Hannibal, not now with so many secrets shared between them already. “I wanted to kill him.”

“What stopped you?” Hannibal asked, putting cut up sausage into a hot pan. The smell was enough to make Will’s mouth wetten.

“Jack. He was coming-- I heard him. If I killed Gideon…,” Will trailed off again but didn’t finish this time.

“If you killed Gideon, Jack would no longer request your assistance,” Hannibal hypothesized

Will gave an imperceptible nod, eyes looking at the floor, and said, “Something like that.”

Hannibal shook the pan, the sausage rolling around in its grease.

“You were in a stressful situation. Abel Gideon has killed before; he could have killed you. Your impulse was no less natural than when you killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs or Tobias Budge. The only difference was the circumstance,” Hannibal said in an even voice.

Will sucked in his lower lip for just a moment, then let his gaze drop straight to his lap.

“I let him go.”

Hannibal stared at Will, a sensation Will could feel without seeing for himself. Will was ashamed to say out loud what he had so easily thought.

“My life wasn’t in danger. I looked at him and knew he didn’t deserve to live, yet I couldn’t kill him,” Will explained, leaving out the worst part.

Hannibal understood his intent, of course, and went on for him, “But the Ripper can.”

“Yes,” Will confirmed. “And it didn’t matter how many people Abel Gideon kills between now and then-- I just needed him dead.”

Hannibal worked in silence until breakfast was done. He carried Will’s plate and his own into the dining room, Will following behind with the blanket still around him and a teacup in one hand. Hannibal put the plates catty-corner at the end of the table and the seat to the right of it. It felt like they were much closer together in this arrangement.

“You feel shame for the potential deaths by Abel Gideon’s hand that you did not prevent,” Hannibal paraphrased Wil’s words to be sure he had them correct.

“Anyone Gideon kills will be my kill,” Will somberly answered.

“And Gideon will not choose victims of whom you would approve,” Hannibal added, a truth that sounded uncomfortable aloud. “You must not claim his crimes as your own. If you have regrets, let them be for your own actions, not those you have borrowed.”

Will ate steadily, listening to Hannibal’s words with care but unbearably hungry after the long night; Will believed the man did not look displeased at this. When he slowed to a more human pace, he subtly took in Hannibal’s appearance. It was surreal to see him donning a black, velvety bathrobe, particularly after the previous evening’s attempted dinner. He looked comfortable, a touch unfinished around the edges-- in the tendrils of soft hair loose from any

attempt at styling and the pajama shirt with a collar that opened more widely than any dress shirt. Will felt as though he'd left an imposter at the dinner table and came back to have breakfast with the real man. He vaguely wondered when this version of Hannibal had started to become more real than the one he first knew.

"I want to fix this," Will said into his plate. Hannibal glanced up at him, a trace of alarm in his eyes. "Gideon-- I want to fix what I've done with Gideon. Any suggestions where he may go?"

Hannibal relaxed again, the alarm gone. After he finished his bite, he answered, "Whatever plan he had will have changed after last night. Let me consider it."

They continued eating in companionable quiet. When the time came to clear the table, a twinge of anxiety twisted in Will's chest as he remembered the previous week's swift destruction. It was a moment he had reconstructed numerous times over the course of the last week, each time following a different pathway than he had in reality. Sometimes, Will dropped the rag immediately, avoiding the lingering touch; he and Hannibal talked as they normally did, and he went home without worry. This version of events was, frankly, the least likely-- Will had entered that evening on edge and plagued by dreams that left him wanting. In another version of the evening, Will leaned into the body that stood next to him, and tentative touch turned to caresses as evening turned to night. That scenario was saved for the twilight moments before sleep, when his mind found itself less restricted.

Leaving the blackness of the forest that evening, Abel Gideon long gone, Will's shaking body was particularly vulnerable to the whispers of the parts of his mind better left contained. Will's skin was cold, so he sought warmth; when he thought of warmth, he thought of Hannibal. Some catastrophic miscommunication resulted in his brain telling his suffering body that if it wanted to feel the very essence of heat, it need only drive to Baltimore. Sitting at the dining table with a blanket cloaking him, the threat of hypothermia and frostbite long passed, Will found he was still seeking that warmth.

These thoughts are what led him to stand when Hannibal stood and to catch Hannibal's right arm when he reached to pick up the empty plate in front of Will's now abandoned chair.

It was a gentle catch, a request to pause instead of a command. Hannibal halted and did not jerk his arm from Will's grasp. He looked at Will with guarded but searching eyes; his face was otherwise a blank mask, refusing to give any hint. Will had committed to this path now-- or something within him had-- and he was going to try.

Will's left hand slid down the soft sleeve of the robe where he had first grasped; he stopped when he touched skin, his hand covering Hannibal's in a near mirror of the previous week. Hannibal's jaw tightened, then relaxed, and he unconsciously licked his bottom lip. Will's heart beat faster now than it had in the forest with Gideon; the small touch had already begun to heat him in the way he craved. Hannibal's eyes glanced down at their hands and turned his palm up, allowing their fingers to loosely interlace. If this was the most touch Will would ever be permitted, he might be happy; the heat spread to his chest and up his neck. He felt flushed and buzzing with energy just below his skin. The feeling compelled him onward.

His right hand came to rest gently just above Hannibal's neck, lightly cupping his jaw. The man's eyes were glassier, pupils dilated, and his mouth was barely parted. They looked over one another's faces, etching the moment into memory as much as seeking a sign. Will took the small step forward required to bring them almost chest to chest. He felt a rush of adrenaline, and electricity surged behind his ribcage.

Will forced himself to look Hannibal in the eyes in spite of their close proximity and the struggle it caused him. He needed Hannibal to understand.

"Last night," Will whispered, "you were behind your wall. I couldn't see you."

Hannibal's gaze fixed on Will's. For just a moment, he looked open and as though he truly did not know what his future held. Will inhaled.

"I *want* to see you."

Will exhaled.

Then he closed the distance between them.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

> Thank you again for the lovely comments-- they really are great encouragement! Plus, it's just plain fun to talk about the show and writing 💚💚💚💚💚
>
> Side note: Trying to decide how far into NSFW territory future chapters are gonna go. I'll give a warning in the chapter notes if/when it's needed.

Hannibal and Will's lips connected lightly, their eyes half-open still. Will pulled back only an inch to gauge the other man's reaction. Hannibal's eyes gazed downward at the lips that had just touched his, and his body remained completely still. Will's mind reflected the stillness of Hannibal's physical form; there was no sound but the oceanic noise of blood rushing in his ears, no sight but Hannibal's downcast eyes, no thought of anything but feeding the white ball of heat radically growing within Will's body.

Their hands were still intertwined, and Hannibal wasn't moving away. Will leaned forward again, this time with painfully clear intent, and pressed their mouths together firmly. It was, objectively, a chaste kiss with lips only slightly parted, but the message it communicated was dangerously fervent: *I want this.*

Will's hand on Hannibal's jaw slid to feel the warmth of his neck, the tip of Will's index and middle fingers brushing the softness of the man's hair. Hannibal's free hand came to rest on Will's side just above his hip. When they came together again, warmer and hungrier than before with their unspoken agreement between them, Hannibal's hand gripped Will's side more firmly, and he kneaded his fingers into the covered flesh. Will exhaled audibly through his nose at the touch, not breaking contact. He felt as though they were melting into one form-- fingers twisting into a single limb, hands embedding into each other's flesh, breath shared in a kiss, and hearts separated by little more than bone. Tilted heads leaned together as they learned to move their mouths in time with each other. Will was real and immovable in the moment, anchored by the connection.

The realization of their oneness was heady and galvanizing. The tip of Will's tongue tentatively caressed Hannibal's, and someone released a shuddered sigh. Will threaded his hand into Hannibal's hair, and his mind flashed memories of cooking together in the kitchen, the soft tendrils falling almost into the man's eyes as he worked. The memory grounded him in both the past and the present-- all of the moments leading to the one they now experienced.

Their interlocked hands released, Will's going to Hannibal's shoulder and the other man's wrapping around to press against the center of Will's back. The vision behind Will's closed eyes went white again-- thoughts dismissed-- as he explored the man's mouth more fully, almost tasting him. When Will took a small breath, backing his mouth away by mere

centimeters, he felt Hannibal draw him back, bottom lip caught by the dull pressure of teeth. This time, Will knew he was the source of the shaky breathing, and he pulled himself tightly against Hannibal's body in response to the terrible, sublime urge to know him.

A few moments of bodies pressed together, and Hannibal arched his shoulders back and tipped his face so that their foreheads touched. Their eyes remained closed and breaths shallow.

"Will," Hannibal said in a tone usually heard by those in prayer. It was reverent and longing.

"I should've stayed," Will said in a hushed whisper.

The hand on Will's back came up to run through his hair, sending a tingle down Will's spine. He thought if Hannibal looked closely enough, he would see the sparks firing under his skin.

"There's no hurry," Hannibal replied, his breathing leveling.

Hannibal pulled his head back, and he and Will scanned their eyes over one another's faces. Will could imagine how wild-eyed and flushed he might appear, but he was glad to see Hannibal was not unmoved. His full lips were slightly pinkened, his eyes were still almost black from the dilated pupils meeting his already dark irises, and his hair was just barely mussed on one side from Will's hand. He was still annoyingly self-possessed, but there was also the hint that he, too, was vulnerable to utter destruction-- something Will had not expected to see and did not know he sought.

Will took a small step backward and dropped his hands to Hannibal's arms as the man's fingers made their way to either side of Will's waist. The air between them was cold after feeling the heat of Hannibal's flesh against his own.

In response to Hannibal's statement, Will said, "Afternoon classes today."

An amused expression played across Hannibal's eyes, and Will felt himself coming back to reality just a bit.

"You haven't slept," Hannibal reminded. Choosing his phrasing very deliberately, Hannibal followed this with, "I do not lack...willingness, but we should enjoy our time together."

Will sighed involuntarily, the first hints of embarrassment creeping up behind him. He would handle that later.

"I need to let my dogs out," Will finally answered, and he saw the amusement in Hannibal's eyes grow. It was on the cusp of fondness.

"Do you have plans tomorrow evening?" Hannibal asked, fingertips rubbing gently where they rested.

Tomorrow sounded like a different century to Will's fuzzy mind and savagely overwrought body, but he managed to say, "Dinner at my house?"

The memory of the last time Hannibal ate at Will's home-- the night Will learned of Abigail killing Nicholas Boyle and Hannibal helping her cover up her crime-- helped shake Will from the dreamy headspace he found himself in as the first rush of chemicals faded. As long as Hannibal didn't confess to any additional crimes, Will would not burn the Brussels sprouts.

Hannibal must have been conjuring the same memory.

"I'll bring the food," he offered. "I disrupted you the last time you hosted."

"7:00?"

"Perfect."

They remained in the loose embrace for a moment longer, until Will released his arms from Hannibal's and took a final step back.

"Thank you for answering the door at 4 AM," Will said awkwardly, feeling that he was omitting a significant chunk of what he was truly grateful for at that moment.

"Of course. I'll continue considering Abel Gideon's whereabouts," Hannibal responded. It took Will a moment to recall that he had asked Hannibal for his thoughts on how to find Gideon again. He probably did need sleep.

Will walked toward the door with the other man behind him. He picked up the canvas bag with his damp clothing from the previous night; his coat with its waterproof exterior was okay to layer on over the thin apparel Hannibal had loaned him. He opened the door, and cold air swept through the foyer.

"See you tomorrow," he said, failing to produce a more elegant farewell.

"I look forward to it," Hannibal answered, eyes dark reddish brown again and glinting in the early morning sun.

Will was still wired on the drive home, struggling to imagine himself being able to sleep now or, possibly, ever again. But the closer he got to his home, the more the adrenaline subsided; the more the adrenaline subsided, the more tired and horrified he felt. By the time he exited his vehicle, he felt like he was dragging himself through a walk of shame in his own driveway.

His family was ecstatic to see him and to sprint into the yard. He left them to run while he briskly showered, wanting to wash away his chase for Abel Gideon. The gang appreciated the extra time, and when he let them in, they were thoroughly covered in snow. After toweling them off and feeding them-- Will then feeling truly guilty for leaving his dogs so long-- he collapsed onto bed. He set his alarm, pulled a pillow over his face both to block out the sun and to hide the redness he could feel in his face, and drifted off.

The alarm sounding was met with a groan. He changed and drove to Quantico, feeling less than refreshed. Thankfully, his students would not be able to tell the difference between this version of surly and his normal interpretation of the adjective. Two classes later, he was dead

on his feet. He got some bitter coffee from a staff break room and headed to Jack's office to check for updates. The door to Crawford's office was open, so Will gave two quick knocks to announce his presence as he walked in.

"Will," Jack greeted, looking grayer than Will remembered. "You look like hell."

Will gave a dry chuckle, figuring it was probably true and knowing for certain that Jack looked no better.

"Rough night," Will answered, and Jack gave him a tired half-grin. "Any news?"

"Frederick Chilton is alive," Jack reported matter-of-factly. "That's because of you."

Will disagreed with a small shake of his head.

"Hate to say it, but Frederick Chilton kept himself alive," Will said wryly.

"If you won't accept that," Jack began, his tone brightening, "maybe you'll accept this."

Crawford opened a desk drawer and pulled out a file and Will's gun. Will walked toward the desk as Crawford held the manilla folder out.

"Stable for field work," Jack happily told him as Will started flipping through the pages of Dr. Russell's report. "You'll get a copy in the mail, but I think you need this back." He slid the gun across the desk. "May have come in handy last night."

Will's stomach lurched at the thought of him having a gun at his disposal last night. The report felt light in his hands.

Will handed the folder back to Jack and took the gun while inquiring, "Have any leads?"

Jack exhaled a weary sigh and said, "No good ones. I'm having officers patrol the areas around Baltimore where the Ripper staged his kills, just in case."

"He won't try it again," Will assured him.

"I don't think so either, but it's all we've got," Jack returned.

Will thought about Hannibal's words and his own reaction to them as he offered, "The Ripper might kill him before we find him."

Jack gave a sardonic laugh-- a dry huff of air through his nose.

"Abel Gideon is a hard man to feel sorry for," Jack replied. Then, he got a thoughtful look in his eyes, one that Will knew well-- it usually meant he was going to suggest something he knew he shouldn't. Will figured it out before Jack said it but let the man speak anyway. "You think we could use him as bait for the Ripper?"

Will crossed his arms over his chest as he mulled it over.

“We’d have to find him first, and then, we’d have to either get Gideon to play ball with us or we’d have to track him. There are a lot of ‘ifs’ in this plan, Jack,” Will reluctantly stated. There was little more that he’d like to do than hang a wriggling Abel Gideon out on a string and wait for a bigger fish to bite.

“And a lot of risk. I’d need someone who thinks quick on his feet, knows how to defend himself if things go sideways, good at reading a room…,” Jack looked at Will expectantly, a challenging smirk on his face.

A hand swiped across Will’s chin. He would do it-- he would do almost anything to solve the puzzle of the Ripper’s identity at this point-- but he also felt like an idiot for even considering coming between one of the most prolific and eccentric serial killers in American history and his target.

“This isn’t a plan, yet. It’s not even a pitch for a plan. Just something to keep in mind,” Jack offered, backing off but making his expectation that Will would join him known.

“Let me know when it’s a plan. I’ll give you my answer then,” Will retorted, and Jack fully grinned at him.

Before leaving campus, Will stopped by Alana’s classroom. She had been assigned additional security after Chilton’s kidnapping, and Will had a feeling she might be restless between the increasingly real threat of Abel Gideon and the tight leash placed on her. She was more or less his friend, and he wanted to see how she was handling the situation.

Alana was at her desk shuffling through a stack of papers when Will came to stand in the doorway; she smiled brightly when she caught sight of him.

“Make yourself at home,” she said, gesturing to the copious available seats. Will chose the one pulled up directly across from her.

“Holding up?” Will asked.

Alana shrugged and responded, “After what happened to Frederick, I shouldn’t complain.” A beat passed, then she questioned, “Any news I should be aware of?”

“Frederick’s alive and Gideon’s missing. If you’ve heard that, you’ve heard it all,” Will wearily answered, unhappy he couldn’t give her more.

“This would be easier if I could be angrier at Gideon, but he’s not completely responsible for his actions. He was subjected to outside influence.” Her voice was even, but the tension in her brow gave away her worry.

“I’d say Chilton will feel angry enough for both of you,” Will remarked.

Alana looked at him with sad eyes when she said, “I told Gideon he’s not in the right state of mind to know who he is.”

Will leaned forward on the desk, resting his elbows on it and clasping his hands together in front of him, so that he could look Alana squarely in the eye when he spoke, saying, “You

have nothing to regret."

Alana reached out and placed her hands over the tops of Will's. He looked down at the hands over his and froze.

"I'm surrounded by armed officers. It feels like I've done something wrong," she explained.

"The occasional armed escort is part of our job. Welcome to the FBI," Will joked stiffly, still not looking up.

"They should've assigned you as my escort. Would have at least been fun cozying up with your dogs in front of the space heater," she said back in a soft, lilting voice. A voice that even Will recognized as mildly flirtatious.

He pulled his hands back from under hers and crossed them over his chest, not knowing where they should go once he removed them. Alana looked confused, then curious. Will had the insane notion that every place Hannibal had touched him was glowing blue like blood spritzed with luminol under a blacklight. The thought caused a heady, feverish wave to pass through him, and Will added it to the rapidly expanding list of things to be ashamed of.

"I'm sorry," Alana apologized after a long moment of silence. "I thought…," she laughed nervously. "I don't know-- I thought maybe you had feelings for me."

For a split second, Will thought he should have let Abel Gideon-- or, for that matter, Garrett Jacob Hobbs or Tobias Budge-- kill him. It would've allowed him to avoid this moment. If Alana had only spoken those words a month earlier, he would have invited her to his home then and there, more than prepared to curl up by his fireplace. Will surprised himself when, as he considered this alternate version of events, he felt a pang of sorrow; imagining a life with Alana wrapped in a blanket, surrounded by his dogs meant forfeiting something else. It was foolish to hold so closely to something he and Hannibal had yet to even define, but his emotions were rarely swayed by logic.

Alana was watching him, and she looked like she expected a response. Her cheeks were slightly tinged pink in embarrassment.

"Uh, yeah," Will eloquently began, putting a hand through his hair. "I kind of did think maybe I had feelings for you."

"And then things changed?" she prompted him to go on.

Will knew his eyes were wide, but he was feeling just enough anxiety to not be able to change that easily.

"I just…," Will combed his brain for the words. His typically extensive vocabulary could not be accessed. He spoke haltingly, "I moved on. So yes, things changed."

"Oh," Alana began, her body relaxing somewhat and the pink beginning to fade. "You met someone. That's great, really. Glad I'm not *that* bad at flirting," she responded gamely. Will felt his own flood of relief that she found this the least offensive response.

“Are you going to tell me about her?” Alana continued, raising her eyebrows.

“I’m not there yet,” Will replied as honestly as he could right then. Alana knew him well enough-- and respected him enough-- to not push.

“When you are, I’m happy to listen,” Alana reassured him, looking genuinely pleased.

Will didn’t answer, too preoccupied with picturing exactly how happy Alana would be were she to hear about this particular relationship.

“I appreciate it,” Will feebly responded. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to make this Gideon situation better for you.”

Alana grinned again and said, “Thank you, Will. You’re a good friend.”

Never as good at accepting a compliment as deflecting an insult, Will left without another word.

Though he was exhausted by the time he got home, Will took the dogs on a long walk to make up for his absence the previous night. After more fetch than he ever wanted to play, Will finally got the group inside. He started cleaning-- what he always did when he knew someone would be coming over-- and continued doing so until midnight, when his tiredness finally caught up with him. He was asleep only a few minutes after flipping off the light, his dogs dozing on the floor or their beds and the space heater warming the space as well as Alana had suggested it would.

When Will dreamed that night, his mind played for him not fantasies but memories.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

▥ NSFW

Thank you all for being patient, and I'm sorry I haven't been able to respond to the amazing comments (I love them so much, and appreciate all of you!). Work has gone totally crazy, and I'm attending a memorial service out-of-state next week, so it may be a little spotty for the next week or so while life settles.

I hope you enjoy and the chapter, and I really, really REALLY hope I didn't just destroy writing about a physical relationship with these two.

Thank you again! <3

His morning classes concluded, Will stared intently into a styrofoam cup of coffee. Occasionally, he would take a mechanical sip, the best impression of normalcy achievable that morning. While Will's mind was eight hours ahead of the rest of the world, his body was situated in the Quantico dining hall, doing its best to not come unglued. Living in the future generally led to anxiety more often than not, and in this particular case, it had resulted in a frozen state of panic. Tasting the acrid, lukewarm coffee, he wondered what brazen spirit had possessed him when he not only rang Hannibal's doorbell in the middle of the night but also cast aside all good judgment long enough to kiss the man. It wasn't overly difficult to blame those actions on channeling Abel Gideon, as the escaped doctor certainly was brash enough to do such a thing if he were so inclined; however, it was harder to attribute *all* of his actions to Gideon when Will recalled-- both in his mind and his senses-- the lingering touch he and Hannibal maintained after separating. Will could not picture Gideon in that particular scene.

This line of thinking led him to summon the entire, hazardously sharp memory of the previous morning and the frighteningly clear want he had felt. As soon as he reignited the fire in his stomach with these memories, the more conscientious portion of his mind interceded; it was easy to drown out logical thoughts when caught up in a moment, but it was nearly impossible to ignore them a day later, sitting in a plastic chair at the FBI campus.

His thoughts cycled in an endless loop with dreadful persistence: First, he worried that allowing some vague notion of romantic interest to guide his actions might effectively have ruined what was one of the closest relationships Will had established-- and certainly the most significant in his current life. This idea led him to the concern that what Will had perceived as his own thoughts and feelings had only been a reflection of the other man's ambiguous interest; it felt vain to think this, but he surely had not so profoundly misconstrued the moment a week and a half earlier when Hannibal let his hand linger over Will's at the sink. And when all of these amorphous fears subsided, Will was still left with the very real

knowledge that if you had asked him only 48 hours ago, he would have said with certainty that he was solely attracted to women. Throughout his life, he had doubted many things about himself— including his own sanity, with worrying frequency — but he had never had reason to question his sexual preference. Admittedly, this was a topic he probably should have wrestled with when the sensual, though not quite sexual, dreams of the symphony began, and it was absolutely one he should have resolved before taking any irrevocable action. Will was horrified for both himself and Hannibal at the thought that he might barrel through his reservations only to find himself physically and mentally unable to maintain desire. Dreaming about hands and music was one thing; being faced with a living, breathing form with angles and anatomy drastically different from any former partner was a universe away from that.

At the end of this cycle, Will would tell himself that he could not go through with even attempting to see Hannibal in a romantic light-- ultimately causing his own memories to betray him and bring warmth to his cheeks. Thus, the merry-go-round of anxiety started again. Round and round he went, coffee growing colder.

He decided to walk the campus to expend some of his nervous energy. He followed the perimeter of the main building and skirted the parking lots, and when the cold became too much, he made a lap around each floor of the BAU building, his presence unlikely to draw any attention. He even walked by Jack's office door, trying to put himself in the agent's line of sight just in case a heinous crime had been committed that might absorb all of Will's thoughts (and evening). The criminals of the world were working unilaterally against him today, though, as Jack gave him a friendly nod and nothing more. When Will walked by the glass windows of the lab on his second lap around the floor, he could feel Beverly watching him curiously; he did not make eye contact and walked faster, not wanting to give her an opportunity to interpret his body language any further. Eventually, Will couldn't continue finding new trails and had to accept the fact he would go home and Hannibal would be at his house at 7 PM.

When he got home, Will finished the few cleaning tasks he didn't get to the night before, took the dogs on a walk, and fed them an early dinner to discourage them from being underfoot when dinner was unpacked. He managed to fit in one final brief walk with the gang before he had to shower and change; it felt like preparing a body for burial, one final wash and carefully selected attire. In Will's case, that meant he wore unremarkable navy blue slacks-- a staple in his work outfits-- and a plaid button-down. He felt he could disappear in an outfit like that, camouflage into any crowd or space, and he liked that. At 6:30, his nerves reached a fever pitch, and he almost poured a stiff drink. He thought better of it and sat down on one of the chairs next to the fireplace instead.

Will realized he was way out of his league with this whole undertaking. Relationships challenged him, touch was not something he was generally very comfortable with, and he truly had no clue how a physical relationship between two men worked. Well, he technically knew *how* it worked, but understanding the blueprint did not make him equipped to build the machine-- and that was assuming he even decided he wanted the machine in the first place. The metaphor lost its accuracy after a few manipulations, but he knew what he meant. All of this is what led to Will grabbing his laptop, opening a private browser window, and searching

using a few highly specific phrases and questions. He clicked on the most reputable-looking links first, always a good researcher.

When he heard a car pulling up his driveway, he snapped his laptop shut like a middle school boy caught with a *Playboy* and hoped he wasn't too red faced. His very limited search had only revealed that being on the receiving end of certain activities was not necessarily a good way to learn how to perform aforementioned activities. He hadn't gotten any further, already too overwhelmed and feeling ill. He believed he felt ill from anxiety, but he couldn't help but also question if he felt unwell because-- as he had worried all day-- he just wasn't going to want whatever it was he'd gotten himself into.

Will walked out to meet Hannibal, ostensibly to give him a hand with carrying in the food but also to cool his face. Some small part of him also hoped that seeing Hannibal would provide immediate answers to his myriad questions.

In a way, it did-- or it at least helped. Hannibal looked like himself, unchanged from when he'd last seen him save for the added dignity of not being in his pajamas. He watched Will with the same warm eyes but otherwise neutral expression he wore most of the time. Will felt incredibly stupid for raking himself over the coals of panic all day; his concerns and questions were real, yes, but Hannibal wasn't some unknown entity hovering over his life like a stormcloud. If anything, it was calming to see the other man's eternal composure and the affection in his gaze that must have been steadily growing, unnoticed, for some time.

"Will," Hannibal gave his standard greeting.

Although Will was feeling marginally better, speaking still seemed like a bad idea, so he stopped himself from frowning and came to stand by the open trunk. Hannibal handed him a bottle of wine, lifted the elegant stainless steel cooler, and requested, "Could you please close the trunk?"

Will obliged with a feeble, "Sure."

Thankfully, Will's pack did not hold such extreme reservations about the evening. The dogs swarmed Hannibal, sitting in a half-circle around him as soon as he stepped into the house. They had learned through the weeks Will was sick that if they sat and looked at Hannibal as though Will had never fed them a day in their lives, the older man would give them all a fair chunk of sausage or jerky-- whatever the treat *du jour* happened to be. Their behavior this evening yielded the same results, and they backed off politely as they got their snacks.

Will poured the wine-- a rich red-- into the glasses on the table by the place settings while Hannibal unpacked. When a meaty tomato mixture was opened, Will's stomach growled audibly; he realized he hadn't eaten yet today, as he'd honestly had no compulsion to do so until this point.

Hannibal glanced at him, eyebrows raised the tiniest bit in amusement, and then went back to unpacking.

"Humans should be fed at least as often as dogs," Hannibal chastised good naturedly.

“What am I being fed this evening?” Will finally spoke, struggling to sound as light and nonchalant as he could.

“Gnudi with veal ragu. A good meal for winter.”

Will didn’t know what every word in the sentence meant, so he watched Hannibal set a pot of water on the stovetop and pull out a container of something that looked similar to gnocchi. He figured any variation on pasta with tomato sauce would be good, and Hannibal’s elevated version smelled just short of divine to Will’s empty stomach.

Will brought Hannibal the glass of wine he’d poured for him, hoping to not drink alone but more than willing to if it took the edge off just a bit.

“Thank you,” Hannibal politely said as he accepted the glass and leaned back, waiting for the water to boil. “How are the new trainees?”

After a healthy sip of wine, Will answered, “Better than last term’s.”

“The herd has been thinned,” Hannibal commented. “I’m certain you were a fair butcher.”

Will’s closed mouth smiled slightly at that. He knew more than a few students who would begrudgingly agree.

“I prefer to ax them myself in the classroom than send them to slaughter in the field,” Will responded.

“There has never existed a popular executioner, but there have been wise ones,” Hannibal remarked.

Will stared at the red wine, feeling for a moment as he had when he was staring into his coffee cup hours ago. He tried to knock himself loose from the hold of fear.

“Do you feel safe in your office?” Will inquired, a brusque question that would have been impolite coming from anyone else.

Hannibal paused for a moment, then replied, “I think about Franklyn on occasion. Tobias Budge is a more enduring presence.” As he took up his task of dropping the small gnudi into the boiling water, he asked in return, “Does Tobias visit you often, as well?”

A deep breath came in and out, controlled, and Will took another long sip out of his glass.

“Not *often*. I dream about him sometimes.”

“Nightmares?” Hannibal pressed.

“Just dreams. He’s usually playing music,” Will described vaguely.

“How does that make you feel?” Hannibal asked, his tone suggesting he knew precisely how much Will relished being asked the question.

Will took a deep, audible inhale through his nose but then replied in an exhaled sigh, “It doesn’t.”

Hannibal flipped the stovetop off and poured the hot water down the sink. He plated the gnudi and ragu swiftly and brought the dishes to the table, Will moving to meet him there.

The man approached the topic from a more pointed angle, questioning, “Are you numb to the memory of killing Tobias?”

Still hungry in spite of the conversation, Will took a bite and savored the taste of the food as he chewed.

“I feel nothing for Tobias Budge. My memories of what happened…,” Will trailed off for a second, took a drink, then stopped short of finishing his statement. He finally sneered, “My mind has preserved what occurred with frightening accuracy-- *feelings* included.”

Hannibal considered this, accepted it as true.

“Do you permit yourself access to these memories?”

Will looked up into Hannibal’s eyes and hoped his own burning gaze conveyed what his vocal cords could not. “Rarely,” he responded.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Will doing a good show of not devouring his meal in an unseemly amount of time.

“Any thoughts on Abel Gideon?” Will inquired, still watching his plate as though it would run away if he looked up again.

“Gideon wants to be discovered by the Chesapeake Ripper. He will not leave Baltimore until he is successful. His first plan a failure, he will become more desperate. I suspect Gideon will leave a clue hidden in his next kill,” Hannibal mused.

“Someone will die because of me,” Will flatly drew the conclusion from Hannibal’s words, frustration hardening his brow. “Who will the next victim be?”

Hannibal took a leisurely bite, in no hurry to share his thoughts further, and Will’s impatience grew.

“He wants to kill those he blames for distorting his perception of himself. He was quite successful in the case of Dr. Carruthers, but Alana and Frederick have eluded this fate, for now. There must be no shortage of nurses and orderlies for him to cast blame upon while he bides his time,” Hannibal said directly, not speaking in riddles and mysteries for once. Will found himself feeling a tugging suspicion in his mind at the doctor’s candor in this matter.

“I could review the files, talk to Chilton,” Will said curtly, acknowledging the man’s advice with no gratitude. It was good advice, but it wasn’t the right advice. To avoid seeming off, he added, “Abel Gideon needs to be back in his cage.”

Hannibal tried to catch his eyes as the same side of his mouth quirked upward that always did when Will said something he appreciated. It was dissatisfying when Hannibal didn't snap back at Will's surliness. Will met Hannibal's lingering gaze, a question on his face.

"When you speak of Abel Gideon, you have disdain for him, perhaps disgust. When you speak of Tobias Budge, there is no trace of either. Tell me, Will, what absolved Tobias of his sins in your eyes?"

Will maintained his own even stare, not wanting to give Hannibal any sign he had become uncomfortable at the observation. Abel Gideon was an egotistical murderer who was alive; Tobias Budge was an egotistical murderer whom Will had killed. The difference was stark, really: Will had exerted all anger and disgust in the singular act of killing Tobias with his bare hands, whereas Gideon had yet to be cleansed in blood.

"Tobias Budge isn't my concern any longer. Abel Gideon is," Will responded, not quite capturing the depth of his true feelings.

Hannibal examined his face shrewdly, reading the glimmer in Will's eyes and the set of his jaw like a well-loved book.

"Tobias Budge was deconstructed by your violence. You don't begrudge the flesh, only the mind guiding it. Abel Gideon is still too whole," Hannibal concluded, digging deeply beneath the surface of Will's words and dragging the hidden treasures there to light.

Will scoffed and swirled the wine in the glass. He roughly replied, "Is that what I think?"

"I would like to know if it isn't," Hannibal answered conversationally.

The dark-haired man didn't want to lie, so he said nothing.

After a few more minutes of only the clink of silverware on dishes, Will started scrambling for something neutral to discuss. He needed a topic that would lead to neither animosity nor whatever it was that had occurred the previous day. Hannibal, of course, had no short supply of topics at the ready.

In a curious tone, Hannibal inquired, "When you think of time, do you think of it as a line or a circle?"

And while Will had most definitely never been asked that question before, he found he had an answer at the ready.

"Neither," he began. "It's a stream."

Hannibal's eyes reflected his engagement; he wanted more.

"Direction, urgency...you could stand in it forever and not be noticed, not change anything. When I need to go away, I can close my eyes and go to my stream," Will described the thoughts he hadn't known he had, trying to articulate something completely abstract.

“In your stream, time flows past you, yet there you stand-- unmoved. Eternal.” Hannibal spoke deliberately. Then, the smallest smile-- just enough to show the tips of his teeth-- came to his lips as he said, “I’ll never absolutely know how your mind works.”

Will had heard some version of this from psychiatrists since he was a child receiving misdiagnosis after misdiagnosis. From Hannibal, though, it was unquestionably meant as praise. Will’s gaze dropped to his plate, and an embarrassed but not fully displeased fluttering passed through his stomach. He felt the same conflict he’d lived with all day, not sure what he was feeling or what he wanted; the only thing he did know was that he could not stand sitting still at the dinner table any longer. Both of their plates were mostly cleared of food, so he didn’t apologize when he abruptly stood up.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Will suggested, bordering on a command. The coiled tension in his limbs and core needed an outlet. He could feel himself growing restless.

Hannibal considered him with interest and stood as well. The men grabbed their coats and walked into the cold night air, the dogs racing past them into the yard. Will led the way, moving forward only on instinct. He kept a comfortable pace, watching the dogs play. Hannibal observed the same scene, but his expression was indecipherable in its blankness.

When Will got to the far end of the yard, he picked up a stick and tossed it back toward the house, sending the dogs running after it. He let his eyes wander discreetly to Hannibal while the dogs ran back; the man was peculiarly silent and standing motionless, facing Will’s house. Hannibal’s mouth was drawn together tighter, and his eyes were moving over each aspect of the structure slowly.

“Something interesting?” Will asked, not able to help himself.

Hannibal took a heavy breath, not a sigh, and kept his eyes forward on the house when he said, “Your ship.”

Will’s eyes darted between Hannibal and the house, and he saw his home again for the first time, watching simultaneously through his own loving eyes and Hannibal’s clearer ones. The feeling of recognition tinged with longing settled over him as he peered at the golden glow. Something in him softened a bit at that-- at Hannibal’s keen memory and commitment to know Will-- and he felt the tiniest bit more at ease.

They circled the perimeter of the large yard. Will began talking about his dogs and the origin of each-- finding Winston on the side of the road, Max appearing on his porch one morning ready to come inside, Harley hopping into his car with him when he opened the door in a grocery store parking lot…

It was a rambling pointless conversation, but it filled the silent air and it felt right for that moment.

When they finally arrived back at the house and went inside, Hannibal didn’t remove his coat and started to make his way to the kitchen. In all fairness, even though it was a Friday night, this was around the point in the evening when the older man would generally leave to make the hour-long drive back to Baltimore. Will’s chronically indecisive mind-- panicking only an

hour or so ago-- felt regretful and sent a dull ache to his chest behind his ribcage. The building anxiety and sudden urge to stop the other man from leaving before Will could find any resolution to his concerns compelled Will to call out his name.

“Hannibal?” He hadn’t meant it to be a question, but it was.

Hannibal turned to look at Will, no change in his expression.

“Yes, Will?” he answered without a trace of worry.

Will stared at him without speaking for a few seconds, his brain not catching up with his actions in a timely way.

Will rubbed a hand over his mouth and crossed his arms in front of him, then said, “Yesterday,” and let his voice flag. The one word was a complete sentence.

Hannibal took a few steps toward him, put his hand on Will’s arm in a way that was fully lacking in romance, and predicted Will’s abandoned words, saying, “There is no expectation. Your discomfort this evening was not entirely concealed.”

While Will wanted to feel a rush of relief that Hannibal had given him an out with no caveats or qualifiers, no awkward explanations or negotiations, Will felt none of those things. He felt a little bit put out, to be frank, and also increasingly warmer with Hannibal standing much closer and touching him innocently but firmly. Will brought one of his own hands up to Hannibal’s shoulder, fingers pressing into the heavy fabric of the coat.

“I’d like to…,” he huffed a sigh when he didn’t know what it was he truly wanted to ask for. The nearer he came to Hannibal, the closer his memories of the previous morning were. His face felt flushed already, and his stomach twisted delightfully. He hunted for the words, but couldn’t catch them. He settled for facts, those helpful things.

“I’ve only been *physical* with women,” Will barely managed to get out the words, hoping they explained more than they should. “Yesterday was different.”

“I didn’t expect you to have had that experience,” Hannibal answered simply, in the way he might tell Will he wouldn’t have expected him to have been to the opera or eaten duck foie gras before.

“I don’t know how I feel,” Will replied, completely true and equally terrible.

Hannibal’s dark eyes continued to watch him intensely.

“Is that uncommon for you, Will?” he questioned, teasing through his bone dry tone.

Will heaved a deep breath in and out through his nose, chest rising and falling.

“It’s not fair to say this to you,” Will responded, becoming more desperately horrified at himself in the face of Hannibal’s coolness.

Hannibal’s eyes gentled, their intensity waning.

“Don’t concern yourself with my tender heart,” he answered, humor that Will couldn’t fully appreciate in his current state of heightening distress.

They both still had a hand on one another, and Will found the touch soothing and distracting in equal measure. Confused, alternating between relieved and overwhelmed, and once again in unimaginably close proximity to the other man, Will took Hannibal at his word and tested the waters, moving his free hand to Hannibal’s other shoulder. Some of the humor faded from Hannibal’s gaze then, a response that spurred Will to continue. He took a small step forward, the length of his body now only a few inches from the one standing across from him. Hannibal hadn’t moved yet, still watching with increasingly darker eyes. The gaze was encouraging in ways Will did not register consciously at that moment.

Will moved his hands inward toward the man’s neck, the closest expanse of exposed skin. One hand wrapped lightly around the back of his neck while the fingertips of the other rested along his jugular before coming down to lay against the man’s side. Hannibal finally brought both hands to Will’s waist as he had the day before, gripping and rubbing small circles. The recognizable action caused the tentatively simmering heat in Will to flare up again, sparking hot like it had before.

When Will moved his mouth toward Hannibal’s, Hannibal met him halfway this time. The first testing brush of lips developed into a searching kiss, mouths parting. Will was too charged to register every movement, but the way Hannibal tilted his opened mouth at just the right slant felt like an invitation. It was surprising to sense sheer excitement at allowing his tongue to graze the other man’s, to perceive the salty sweet flesh and want another taste as soon as he pulled away to close the kiss. They stayed apart long enough for a single breath before coming together again, Will wanting to experience every way he could possibly kiss Hannibal; he gave a soft, lightly sucking kiss to his bottom lip, then his top, the man exhaling a puff of air in between. Will returned to letting his tongue slip exploring caresses against Hannibal’s; when they pulled apart momentarily again, Will recalled what Hannibal had done last time and carefully let his teeth sink on the man’s lower lip, preventing them from entirely separating. A sigh began to escape Hannibal but he seemed to catch it and force it back down his throat; instead, he put one of the two hands on Will’s sides on Will’s lower back and the other into his hair, and with a single pull, he brought Will’s body flush against his own.

Hannibal’s mouth and hands felt consuming, and Will once more found his mind going quiet in the white heat rising from the pit of his stomach to his chest. With the whole of his body aligned and meshed with Hanibal’s, tingling warmth spread through his form, making him feel loose limbed but bursting with untapped energy. It was also unexpected to Will that he felt an acute sense of arousal at the kissing and embrace; his hips and thighs tensed obscenely as their bodies pressed together, and he could feel he was hardening.

The recognition of his own physical response compelled him to search for Hannibal’s bare skin. Without thinking he began unbuttoning the man’s coat-- entirely too much fabric separating them-- and pushing it down off of his shoulders. Will thought he could feel Hannibal smile under his mouth, so he nipped his bottom lip again, once more receiving a suppressed shudder in thanks. Will started on the button down next, the sliver of a reasonable mind left functioning in his brain grateful Hannibal had not come dressed in a full suit this evening.

He did not push the shirt down off of Hannibal's arms immediately as he had done the coat. Will's blind intent had been to feel skin, and this had been amply achieved. Had he been thinking clearly, Will would have felt lecherous running his hands from ribs to hips then around to the expanse of Hannibal's back. It was disconcerting for a moment to feel body hair, the broadness of a strong back, and a solid, well-built frame; these were entirely new sensations, and he had no frame of reference for them other than feeling his own body. Yet, with the taste of Hanniba on his own tongue, the wood and spice scent of the man's cologne in his nose, and molten blood flowing under his skin, Will did not feel anything similar to disgust-- as he had feared-- or horror. Within Will's mind, Hannibal cut a strong, imposing figure, and there was a poetic rightness that the man's physical body reflected this strength.

Hannibal let his mouth drop to Will's jawline, leaving a trail of kisses marked by lightly scratching teeth as he worked down to Will's neck. Will felt useless and utterly entranced, one hand running up and down Hannibal's back, stopping to feel knots of muscle, and the other now laced through the man's hair. It took a moment for Will to register that Hannibal was thumbing at the top bottom of his shirt but had not undone it. Through his haze, Will guessed correctly that it wasn't timidity-- Hannibal could in no way be described as timid, under any circumstances-- but wariness that made him pause; Will had run off before at the touch of a hand. Besides, hadn't Will been wondering just this afternoon if it was even possible to become aroused by Hannibal's touch? The hesitation was in no way unwarranted.

Will didn't try to speak, knowing how unfocused and breathy he would sound, so he removed his hand from Hannibal's hair long enough to pull the hand on the button up to be kissed. When the hand was released, there was no longer pause. A few buttons were undone, and Hannibal ran his hand across his sternum, breezing across the plane. Feeling the man's touch on skin that was normally concealed made his chest tighten and breath catch. After the rest of the buttons were undone, Hannibal pulled Will back to him again, and their bare skin touched as they returned to sucking, nipping kisses.

Will's heart thrummed wildly in his chest and his ears, and what had been a welcome recognition of desire only moments ago had grown into an aching need. He pressed himself harder against Hannibal's body-- he could not get close enough to the twin heat emanating from the fair-haired man-- and was reminded once more of the distinct differences between this physical experience and all of his prior ones. Again, he felt the downy hair trailing down Hannibal's chest and the strength under his fingertips, but he also noticed that Hannibal was not unaffected by their intimacy. It was novel and exhilarating and alarming to feel the physical manifestation of desire so plainly.

They were a mess of limbs and shuddering breath, not enough air between them yet still too much space. Will's hands rubbed up directly under the man's shoulder blades, marveling still at both the newness of the experience and his own profound reaction to it; one of Hannibal's rubbed at Will's lower back and the other came to grip under his jaw and ear. During a particularly devastating kiss-- Will feeling Hannibal's mouth gently but distinctly suction so that Will felt as though Hannibal were drinking him in-- Will instinctively ground forward, seeking pressure. It seemed that was a sign Will was not aware Hannibal had been waiting for, as the man moved the hand from Will's back to pull his shirt the rest of the way off. Will felt and heard the faintest sound come from his throat at the cool air hitting his back while Hannibal's deliciously warm hand resumed its rubbing circles there; the other man caught the

sound, as well, and dropped the hand to guide Will's hips against his own. It was equally, if not more, effective when guided, and the friction of the movement caused the tiniest spark of flashes to fall behind Will's eyes.

When Hannibal's hand went to Will's buckle and, as before, paused, Will was too breathless and intoxicated to determine a nonverbal form of permission, so instead, he murmured "Yes" against-- into-- the other man's mouth. And then they were moving, Hannibal walking Will to his bed and Will single-mindedly watching Hannibal's hands unbuckle his belt between kisses. Before they reached the bed, Will's pants were also undone. He spared a second of shame at the sight of his boxers vulgarly extended by his hardness, but when he noticed Hannibal's eyes focusing there as well, Will saw the composed man in a way he hadn't before. Hannibal's blackened irises were liquid in the shadowy room, his lips reddened from their ardor, and the sharp tips of his teeth bared; he looked at Will's body as if he hadn't chosen whether to worship him or devour him. Will preferred neither option, but the unsteady middle ground the man was rooted in now had a distinct appeal.

A disturbing, unbidden thought passed through Will's mind for a fraction of a second: *Hannibal could kill me if he wanted.* It was so grotesquely out of place in the situation, but the older man's intensity and heretofore unknown strength of form coalesced into that single fact emerging from Will's tragically quick mind. The thought dissipated among the flood of hormones and overworked senses as swiftly as it had come. Any final splinters from the idea were swept neatly away when Hannibal looked into Will's eyes, no sign of malice or ill intent; Will saw familiarity, understanding, and a wanton desire equal to, if not greater than, his own. The kiss they leaned into was more tender than the last, an action of recognition and promise more than stoking the already blazing fire between them.

Will failed to stop the gasp he uttered into Hannibal's mouth when he felt a finger run along his length through the fabric of his boxers. Hannibal had the decency not to smirk this time, but he did guide them the rest of the way to the bed, Will kicking off his shoes and Hannibal removing his pants the rest of the way as he got to his back. Will was secretly glad that Hannibal laid to his side instead of directly on top of him; he still wasn't acclimated to dealing with a male figure, and he may have felt trapped. This arrangement also gave Hannibal unfettered access to continue learning how to touch Will. A finger was again run teasingly up and down; it was a flirtation as much as a test of boundaries, and Will responded to it in a way he imagined Hannibal found very enjoyable-- breathing harder and opening his mouth in a silent acknowledgement of the action. Will tried not to wriggle under the touch, but he could not control all of his body's reactions; he felt himself twitch, and when he looked down at the finger toying with him, he saw the damp spot on the front of his boxers that gave away just how effective everything thus far had been.

Will's eyes were still half-lidded and watching Hannibal's actions when the roaming hand slipped under his waistband. The first touch was a delicate two-finger stroke, an attempt to prevent overwhelming him. The next was a loose semicircle running up and down in a tamer version of what Will had done alone far more than once. Will was already breathing hard and becoming tense with welcome anticipation, so when the hand finally wrapped firmly around him and moved up slowly with a nicely pressured grip, his breath caught in a ghost of a moan. This happened again and again, the slow strokes and Will muffling a vocalization. Hannibal worked the boxers down so that Will could see the movements, but Will could only

watch for a short time before became overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of stimuli bombarding him-- the exquisite physical pleasure, the sensory input from two people's charged bodies, the vague awareness of Hannibal still intently watching him, the vast arousal still building within him.

"Will," Hannibal whispered into his ear, voice breathy and low.

Will looked at him from far away.

"Tell me what you want," the man commanded.

Some permutation of this question had been posed to him countlessly throughout his life, usually by Will himself. There were some definite answers he'd arrived at-- he wanted a dog, he wanted to save lives, he wanted to be left alone-- but when it came to situations like this, he typically sputtered. They were too fraught with feelings, from within and from others, and too reliant on Will knowing himself with perfect clarity on the given day.

However, the white wall his mind had constructed around itself in this moment did not allow for wavering, so Will immediately responded in an equally throaty tone, "Touch me."

One of them brought their mouths together, the kiss deeper and wetter than before; Will's hands wandered desperately over the body beside his, tangling in hair and pressing into bone. When the kiss broke, lips dampened with their mingled tastes, Hannibal glanced around looking for something; after a quick scan, he eventually brought his hand to his mouth, and Will realized he was looking for lubricant. That particular item was in Will's bathroom, but through the fog of need, he found the ever-polite man's tawdry courtesy charming in a strange way. Will wanted to tell him that as unbearably close as he already was, he didn't think they would arrive at the point where too much friction would be an issue. As shoddy a substitute as saliva was, the entire evening-- from his tension before Hannibal arrived to the narcotic sight of the poised doctor looking at him with a savage glint-- had become the most agonizing foreplay for his intimacy-starved body.

Hannibal moved his hand in slow, fluid movements, finding a tempo as he gauged Will's labored breathing and expressions. When Will allowed himself an experimental, small thrust into the grip, it was affirmed by a kiss to the clavicle that ended with teeth cradling bone; permitting himself to move against the source of his pleasure was a sublime allowance, and he stretched his head back with his eyes closed. Will's forced himself to stay present, and opened his eyes; his stare slid back to watching the hand on his erection working in a rhythm, bringing a glisten to the reddening skin of his tip. He felt a firm press against his thigh, Hannibal's rigidity rubbing into the flesh there as he worked his hand over Will. The evidence of the other man's arousal and the knowledge that he had helped bring Hannibal to this state was heady.

When Hannibal dipped his mouth to the space just under Will's navel-- never stuttering in his rhythm-- the feelings of lips on his flesh was eclipsed by the visual. Will couldn't help but imagine Hannibal's mouth only inches lower, taking the place of his nimble fingers, and that new, vivid mental image elevated Will's thrumming pleasure to an excruciating need for release. He was hot across his chest and could feel dampness at his forehead and beneath his back, all while the racing drum of his heart made it increasingly difficult to breathe. Sweet

tension tightened his entire body, and recognizing how close he was, he whispered through a shudder, “Hannibal…”

The man glanced up from his place at Will’s stomach with the same inky depth in his eyes. Will tried to say something-- a warning, he supposed-- but couldn’t find the words through his darkening vision. A smile, which would only be recognizable by someone who knew Hannibal and his microexpressions exceedingly well, flitted across the man’s face, and he descended to resume working his mouth along Will’s lower stomach, kissing, licking, biting, sucking.

Seconds later, Will’s vision went black and his eyes closed of their own accord; then, silvery white bloomed behind his closed lids as his body spilled from tension to exquisite spasms. His muscles pulled taught, and waves of shivering contractions rolled outward from his center, forcing him to struggle for air and muffle the sounds escaping him with a hand over his mouth. Hannibal’s lips pressed more lightly against him and were tracking up his abdomen as Will melted into a liquid pool, small waves passing through him with a shiver as the hand on him slowed, then stopped, but did not fully release. Sharp sensitivity caused him to push back into the bed, but the warmth of Hannibal’s mouth moving over his sternum distracted some of his attention and began calming his overworked nerves. He opened his eyes just enough to see Hannibal reach his neck, and Will nudged him into a tender kiss; when they separated, he let his head fall back again as he became a puddle of exhaustion. Unthinking and unseeing, his hand grasped out to stroke the other man’s hair-- a gesture of comfort for Will, not Hannibal.

Over many minutes, the sweat on Will’s skin began to cool and dry, and his heart sank back into a regular rhythm. Hannibal gave his shoulder a quick, chaste kiss, then rose and disappeared. Will’s side felt cold without the presence. Thought began returning to Will’s mind, and with it came the horror of understanding that Hannibal was undoubtedly washing his hands clean of the remnants of Will’s orgasm. The mere idea that he had spilled bodily fluids onto a man who wore a *waistcoat* regularly was mortifying, and Will brought both hands to his face involuntarily, hiding from the world the best he could. He stood up, feeling dizzy and weak-kneed, and grabbed his boxers; with his underwear hanging from his hands like a fig leaf, he waited anxiously for the bathroom to open so that he could switch places with Hannibal both to clean himself and to disappear for a few moments. As soon as Hannibal was out of the door, Will shifted by him awkwardly.

After washing and taking several deep breaths, Will tried to talk himself into facing the other man. Not only was it astoundingly rude to hide from someone who had just brought him immense pleasure, he also hadn’t even attempted to offer Hannibal anything in return. With his arousal faded, the thought of having to figure out how to work with a new body-- a man’s body-- provided him with a fresh hell of panic. The situation was worsened when Will caught sight of himself in the mirror and was horrified to see how altogether debauched he looked with his dilated eyes, too-pink lips, crazed hair, and splotches of what would probably be bruises along his collarbone. He turned away from the mirror, deciding to deal with one crisis at a time. He eventually splashed his face with cold water, took a few more deliberate inhales and exhales, and exited the small room.

Hannibal was in the kitchen-- of course-- cleaning up from dinner. He had rebuttoned his shirt but was not entirely put back together yet, hair and shirt slightly askew. Will grabbed a clean pair of boxers and a t-shirt from his drawer, dressing before trying to interact.

His loose limbs felt heavy, and in spite of his mental anxiety, his body remained relaxed. Hannibal noticed him and gave him an appreciative look with a barely upturned mouth and fine lines around his smiling eyes. Will knew that the fluttering affection he felt at that look should be attributed to the injection of dopamine and oxytocin presently coloring his perspective, but that didn't make the feeling any less powerful. It made him step closer, and when Hannibal reached a hand to his side and invited him forward, Will walked into the embrace. It was soft and innocent in the wake of what had just occurred, their faces touching cheek-to-cheek and their arms wrapped loosely around one another's midsection.

Whispering directly into Hannibal's ear, Will evened out his voice as he tried to offer to return the pleasure he had received, saying, "What can I…?"

Before he finished, Hannibal turned his head and kissed Will's temple, then responded, "No."

And that certainly was not one of the options Will had given himself when his mind was haranguing him in the bathroom. He didn't move, his paltry list of ideas as to how to proceed in this situation exhausted.

Will couldn't fathom having a conversation of any depth at the moment, however, so he intoned Hannibal's words from the previous day: "In no hurry?"

The squeeze of arms around his body and deep inhale in his hair answered his question.

"Not tonight," Hannibal elaborated slightly.

Will wondered if he should feel guilty-- this was almost surely a response to the obvious torment Will had put himself through that day and his apparent hesitation to engage in a physical relationship with a male partner. He didn't think Hannibal shunned any form of enjoyment, so it was striking to Will that he rejected this offer now. It was another form of debt, but at least Will was highly motivated to repay this one.

Only somewhat joking, Will asked, "So, what are you doing tomorrow?"

The deep, quiet chuckle that rumbled from Hannibal's body in response was worth all of the agony Will had put himself through to arrive at that moment.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> I love, love, love your comments and kind words! Life is still crazy, so writing has been less consistent. I hope this weekend will see things settle down somewhat. I wanted this to be the first half of a chapter, but it started getting long, so I figured I'd go ahead and post. More of the NSFW in 21, but this chapter is safe (minus slight gore).

Will was disappointed and relieved that Hannibal was occupied by his work on both Saturday and Sunday. He had been solicited by a former colleague to co-author a piece on effective research track mentorship strategies for doctoral candidates in psychiatric residencies at Johns Hopkins, and he had committed himself to working on cleaning up the data and starting the process of data analysis. It was all fairly ivory tower as far as Will was concerned, but the concept of bettering mentor programs somehow rang as slightly more altruistic than some of the sensationalist pieces he read in the handful of journals that occasionally turned up in his work mail at Quantico. Regardless, it provided much-needed room to breathe. He hadn't entirely been joking when he suggested a continuation of the evening into Saturday-- and he hated himself for that display of *need*.

Will was aware he had not been as discerning as was typical in his words and actions; that seemed to be something of a pattern lately. He understood the biochemical factors that could blur one's usually clear vision, but knowing about them-- or even just remembering the teenage rendition which was driven by an imbalanced cocktail of changing hormones-- did not prepare him well for the adult onslaught. He was in his thirties, and yet, he found himself driven to distraction. When Will walked his dogs down long, meandering pathways on Saturday and Sunday, he thought of Hannibal seeing a ship on the horizon. When Will forced himself to sit still and read a few chapters of a half-finished book, he thought of the loft library in Hannibal's office and the odd treasures buried there. When Will made dinner Saturday evening, he thought of the cooking lessons he hadn't asked for but appreciated along with the now-countless times he'd sat across from the other man and traded barbs while eating an exotic delicacy. When Will retreated to the barn on Sunday to work on a boat motor as the kerosene heater worked double time, he thought of nimbler, softer fingers holding a scalpel. When Will laid down in bed each night, he remembered the vivid pressing of hands and mouths and the sounds of breathing and muffled moans coming from *someone*. Dreams became replays of the night, sending him upright with the sound of a zipper being pulled ringing in his ears, along with this thudding heartbeat.

For someone who absorbed the feelings of others to the point of pain but who had become incredibly effective at removing himself from the emotional fray of humanity, it was all too much.

It was unsustainable. It was narcotic.

It was wonderful.

And that last thought was how Will knew he was no more immune to the chemical effects of physical intimacy than anyone. It also suggested something about his feelings for Hannibal-- his friend-- that were disconcerting at the very least.

The weekend separation and all of its raw feelings also put firmly to rest the idea that he was incapable of being attracted to a man, or at least this particular man. He still held reservations-- or, more accurately, concerns-- about what acts he was comfortable with and could participate in without having an actual, honest-to-god panic attack, but the scale that balanced concern and desire had careened hazardously in the latter's favor. The fact that he hadn't yet experienced being the giver of pleasure only spurred him on-- he didn't like the feeling they were somehow lopsided, and though he silently appreciated Hannibal insisting on a slowed progression of their physical relationship, he loathed the idea of being given special treatment.

Which was all to say that he was just short of desperate to see what their next encounter held because he simply couldn't live like this. Even if he was technically functional, his obsessive mind and keen sense of shame wouldn't allow it.

Monday morning held the promise of normalcy. Will was almost excited to see his students and talk at them for a few hours about the pathology behind post-mortem mutilations centered around decapitation. Will successfully delivered his gory but intriguing lesson to his first class, but when the second class came, Jack Crawford arrived with it. He had a stony expression, brow in a straight line and lips sucked close to his teeth; it informed Will his unique services would be required. He went to meet Jack in the hall, not enjoying the special brand of tension the agent brought to his classroom and the young agents in training. Just as Will could read Jack's face, he could predict the words that would come out of his mouth.

"There's a body?" Will asked, cutting Jack off before he could deliver his prologue.

Jack's stoic— not irritated— expression gave away the rest of the news.

"Abel Gideon?"

"Possibly. Dr. Alice Maynard," Jack replied. Will rubbed his fingers up his face and under his glasses, pressing on his eyes hard enough to see red. "Her body was found this morning at The University of Baltimore. Strangulation."

Will exhaled harshly and commented, "Almost benign for him."

"Her eyes were removed. We haven't found them yet," Jack added, finishing the picture in Will's mind with vibrant strokes of purple bruises and deep red and black eye sockets.

"Ah," Will breathed out in response.

"Want a ride? I've got coverage for your class."

Will shook his head, partially not wanting to ride with Jack while he still felt irritated at his class being canceled but also liking the idea of having the freedom to come and go when he wanted. Jack had a tendency to tie him to a place, a hound chained to a stake.

At the university, Alice Maynard's body was propped unceremoniously against the stairs of the building that was home to the psychology classes— another damning piece of evidence that Abel Gideon was too heavy-handed in his methods to possibly be the Ripper. It didn't take a profiler with any special talent to see what had occurred here, and Will suspected Jack only wanted him present to keep him involved in the search for the mad doctor.

Beverly and Zeller were already on the scene-- a far tamer one than they were used to-- and loitered around the body as they waited for Will and Jack to appear. Beverly gave Will a bright smile when she saw him, and he'd be lying if he said it didn't feel good to be acknowledged by someone at a crime scene with a grin instead of sidelong glances and cold tones.

"Graham!" she called him over. Zeller didn't look particularly pleased or displeased to see him, which was an improvement.

Will walked to them, a sudden wash of awkwardness coming over him at the barest hint of needing to perform friendship.

"Anything helpful?" he asked, which probably wasn't the smoothest or friendliest greeting. Beverly didn't seem to notice.

"I'm not seeing anything we don't already know. Broken capillaries plus the lack of other visible abrasions or wounds-- aside from the eyes-- suggest strangulation was the cause of death."

Zeller piped in, "She also has a ribbon around her neck…"

"Could've been added after death," Beverly pushed back, then relented, "but I don't think it was. We won't know until we have her in the lab and can examine the markings and airways."

Will nodded, then asked, "And the eyes?"

"Removed cleanly," Beverly answered.

"Yet nowhere to be seen," Zeller added, dodging the dirty look Beverly gave him at the pun.

Will didn't want to ask the next question, but it was his responsibility to do so: He had been the cause of this death, and he had no right to shy away from it now.

"Before or after death?" he finally inquired.

Beverly scanned Will's face before responding, hearing something there Will thought he'd hidden.

“Don’t know yet. Based on the amount of blood and bruising, my guess is before,” Beverly responded professionally.

Alice Maynard called to Will from the ground, warding off the outside noise of the investigators and local PD managing the crime scene. She bid him to *look* and to *see*. He finally let his gaze run across the scene with the intention of understanding it. He approached the body and knelt down beside Alice, her empty sockets staring into oblivion. He saw the bloody holes, the gold satin ribbon pressed into the flesh of her throat just below the bruised ring, and the angry red on either side of her neck. Her pencil skirt was torn at the bottom seam and her wrists had finger-shaped bruises on them. Will saw her putting up a fight and was proud of her; the Ripper would have been proud of her, too, Will thought, although Abel Gideon would’ve found it an annoyance. The Ripper certainly made for a strange bedfellow in Will’s mind, but it was just shy of comforting to have a common enemy with the peerless murderer. Even through his guilt, Will could tell that Jack was right-- Abel Gideon was fine bait, and the more he understood about the Ripper, the more Will would understand as well.

Alice Maynard was collateral damage in this undertaking, and Will suspected she didn’t deserve to be. She was a young professional woman with her life and career ahead of her. Her badge suggested she worked at an adolescent psychiatric care facility nearby, and the smiling face of the woman in the tiny ID photo held no trace of malice.

Will knew he was burning time pondering these ideas-- they meant nothing to anyone but him. Being so close to the body, Will took off his glasses, let his eyes close, and went backward in time: *I watch Alice Maynard walk to her car. I follow her. I keep a distance between us, but I need the privacy of her home for what I am to do. I have no home of my own. As soon as her key is in her door, I attack her from behind. She fights back, so I catch her wrists, bruising them; I subdue her by putting my hands around her neck, but I don’t kill her yet. I do not scramble her brain because she did not scramble mine-- but she was not innocent. Therefore, I take her eyes. She was blind in life, and she will be blind in death. I dump her at the university, the place that saw the beginning of her end.*

Will snapped back to reality, no new insights necessarily but a lingering feeling of disgust toward Alice Maynard on behalf of Abel Gideon’s twisted mind.

“Got anything?” Jack asked.

“Abel Gideon. She’ll have worked with him at some point when she was in college, probably at the hospital. It was personal for Gideon, but he didn’t *hate* her.” Will gave a dry, wry chuckle as he spit out, “He was just disgusted by her lack of vision.”

“How do we know it’s not the Ripper?”

“The Ripper elevates those he sees as lesser through tableaux and coded messages. This killer lacks that perspective,” Will answered.

Jack nodded, satisfied. It had become almost impulse for him now to question whether any murder with a dash of flair was the Ripper, and Will couldn’t say he blamed him after the ordeal with Miriam Lass. If anything, he understood the man’s guilt more after letting Gideon

escape. Jack allowed Miriam to be kidnapped and maimed because of his lust for justice; Will allowed Alice Maynard to die because of his lust for Abel Gideon's blood.

"Anything else?" Will asked in a clipped tone, his own remorse making him impatient.

Jack dismissed him with a wave of his hand, already turning to interrogate Zeller and Beverly.

Will sat in his car for a few moments searching for an anchor. He felt tossed around by waves of regret and vengeance. He should've killed Abel Gideon when he had the chance-- removed him and his petty violence from the world. These thoughts didn't disturb him as much as they should, and he couldn't find it within himself to manufacture the appropriate emotions. Still, this uncharted water was jarring for him, and he sought some reminder of who he was and his place in the world. He thought about calling Hannibal-- had the first three digits dialed-- but thought better of it. Hannibal was not his therapist, and the blurred lines of their relationship made it difficult to tell whether Will should still turn to him for affirmation of his existence in the world outside the river of unsavory thoughts he found himself wading through. Hannibal would answer if Will called and would give him what he needed-- Will didn't doubt that, not anymore-- but it seemed like asking *too much*.

Will often had been defined by extremes in his younger relationships: too emotional, too cold, too snappy, too sad, too indecisive, too independent, too moody, too removed. The list was endless and full of contradictions.

Will ultimately started the car and began to drive toward Wolf Trap, his classes having ended by now. He didn't get far when his cell phone rang, Jack's name appearing on the screen.

"Jack?"

"Will, the eyes have been found. University of Maryland. On a professor's desk."

"On my way."

Jack and Will arrived at almost the same time and were directed by a harried secretary to the scene. There wasn't much to decipher: Two eyes placed at the edge of the professor's desk looking out at the student seating. It was a psychology professor, of course.

Staring into Alice Maynard's disembodied eyes, Will inquired, "Where did she go to college?"

Jack shook his head, uncertain.

"I don't know yet, but I will."

Two universities, two dump sites. It wasn't coincidental by any means, and while a hamfisted attempt at critiquing psychiatric practices in America wasn't necessarily beyond Abel Gideon's abilities, his concerns didn't generally extend far beyond himself. Maybe she had attended both schools at different points. Still, it would have made more sense for him to

arrange her body and eyes at the university she was enrolled at during her interactions with Gideon. The message was more or less coherent-- much like the killer himself-- but there was still a missing piece in the shape of a message to the Ripper. Of course, this assumed Hannibal had been correct in asserting that Gideon would try to reach the other murderer again. The theory felt right even if there was no more concrete evidence than Will's deepening grasp of Abel Gideon's mind and Hannibal's professional intuition.

"Will," Jack's bass voice brought him back to the classroom, eyes still perched on the oak desk. "I said we'll meet tomorrow morning, 9 o'clock. Lab should be ready then."

"Right," Will replied, though he had not heard a single word Jack said the first time. "Tomorrow," he repeated.

A flash of worry crossed Jack's eyes before he narrowed them and titled his head to the side, masking the concern with inquiry.

"Are you good?"

The question grated on Will's nerves-- a reminder of both how far he'd come from where he was when he started with the BAU as well as how tentative his current general well-being truly was.

"I'm fine," he answered in a clipped voice, harsher than he intended.

"Would you tell me if you weren't?" Jack pressed, which meant Will must have looked truly off-kilter for a moment.

"Tomorrow at 9," Will gave as a sharp answer and left before Jack could muster anymore compassion.

Will didn't leave the campus right away, feeling fatigued and more than a little bit like a failure. One step forward, two steps back. He found a coffee shop swarming with university students. In line, the sensational news of organs found on a teacher's desk was already circulating among the clusters of students. Will tried to let the noises blur, not focusing on any one in particular. He nursed his overpriced coffee on a bench outside, the cold not touching him. He was no closer to identifying himself and his true reaction to the murder of Dr. Maynard than he had been earlier.

He let himself consider what had been running as a consistent stream of thought in the back of his mind for hours now: He wasn't so far from the place he often turned to when he sought to know himself again. Will's chest fluttered with tension once more-- an adolescent feeling that was no less intense for that realization. He didn't stop after the first three digits this time.

"Hello?" An almost cheerful word in the lilting accent.

"Hey," Will greeted, sounding much more deflated than he was.

"Will." It was good to hear his name come from a friendly mouth. He hoped it wouldn't be followed by "Are you alright?" It was a question he couldn't answer no matter how many

hundreds of times it was asked.

"I'm glad you called."

Will's chest released some of the pressure building there.

"I'm at the University of Maryland. Abel Gideon killed again."

"The young woman on the news." It wasn't a question. *"Would you like company?"*

And while Will's anxiety abated even further at how easy Hannibal made it-- them-- seem, there was a renewed surge of panic at the idea of being alone again. He felt no compulsion to lie.

"I'd like that, yes."

"I have one more patient. Two hours."

A surge of laughter emerged from a group of young men leaving the coffee shop. A slim, lanky one told the stouter boy across from him, "Dude, that's so fucked up." Will could assume what the joke had been about.

It seemed Hannibal had also overheard a good deal of this, as he asked *"Where are you?"*

Will imagined a college coffee shop was tantamount to a brothel for the other man.

"Just on the campus," Will vaguely answered. There was a long pause before Hannibal spoke again, and when he did, his voice sounded like it was a measured calm instead of his usual, genuine composure.

"Don't become lost in the past, no matter how near it may be. The door at the back of my house has a keypad; I'll send you the code. You're welcome there if you elect to allow yourself a detour."

Will smiled at that for a moment, a small expression that was hidden away as quickly as it came. The phrasing-- *if you elect*-- was a blatant attempt to avoid Will's ubiquitous defensiveness; from someone else it would have read as manipulative. He sighed just loudly enough for the other man to hear and said nothing.

"I'll see you this evening."

It was ostensibly a statement but the hint of a question eked in. It was nice to have someone expecting him-- someone who would notice if he was gone.

"Yes," he answered weakly, no way to express what he thought nor any desire to attempt it.

The phone call ended, and Will was overcome with a crushing need to escape the campus and Alice Maynard. He tossed the mostly full cup of coffee-- burnt, bland-- into a trashcan and walked briskly toward the visitor's parking area, all the while sensing that if he looked behind him, Dr. Maynard's sightless body would be only a breath away.

He took his time on the drive, trying to stretch it out for reasons he didn't attempt to grasp. The looming home that had once seemed like the sterile museum of an elitist doctor chomping at the bit to pick Will apart now looked like a waiting friend, familiar and open to him. He had the vague notion a neighbor might think the scruffy man wandering around the property was a burglar, but he also presumed that his vehicle must be known by any nosy neighbors by now. That was another thought he stowed away for later stewing-- that he was already enmeshed in someone else's life in the eyes of strangers. Keying in the number-- eight digits-- he almost hoped the door remained locked. There was something terribly intimate about having unfettered admittance to another's home, and the question behind why exactly Hannibal would grant him this unprecedented level of access circled too closely to the questions he'd asked himself earlier about what exactly the nature of their relationship was. A pressure built behind his eyes as the small indicator light flashed twice and the deadbolt clicked back into the recess of the door.

It felt taboo being in another's home-- Hannibal's home-- without the owner present. The curious part of him wanted to take a self-guided tour to see if he could find where the man he had come to devote so much time to thinking about recently went when he wanted solace. However, the wiser and larger part of him was too unnerved to so much as touch a countertop. He wandered into the kitchen by instinct and was simultaneously relieved and unsettled: It was the same as it ever was and still held memories Will kept deep within his mind, but it was somehow bereft without Hannibal's presence. He continued through the house, making his way to the dark living room. He formed a loose plan to build a fire and grab one of the many books off of Hannibal's shelves in the study. He tried to imagine himself through the other man's eyes, and he couldn't find any fault with sitting on a couch reading a book. It was as safe as anything else he'd done lately in relation to Dr. Lecter.

He started the fire, chose a copy of the Oresteia trilogy from the shelf, and settled into the sofa. He hadn't revisited any of the Greek epics since his undergraduate program, but he had always enjoyed the humanity captured by works so far from his own place and time. He imagined Hannibal enjoyed the drama and the way the gods toyed with the lowly mortals.

Will was a good chunk of the way through Agamemnon when he heard the front door open. He had been too distracted by the affairs of the King and Queen of Mycenae, backed by a soundtrack of crackling wood, to watch the clock tick and build a proper panic. He was an intruder in this space, but he'd allowed himself to forget that for an hour. The book was probably some kind of first edition translation bound in the skin of a dodo bird-- there were too many opportunities for missteps.

Hannibal appeared in the doorway to the living room, and Will studied his face rapidly. He was ready to jump to defense-- or at least sarcasm-- if questioned. He could feel the tiny surge of adrenaline as his acute stress response kicked into gear.

But Hannibal looked at him with eyes warmed by the flickering of the fire and a few crinkles around his eyes, the traces of a smile that didn't reach his lips. It was the first expression Hannibal's face fell into-- and that was generally the most sincere one. Will watched as the man glanced down quickly then up again, looking not cold but also not quite as warm. It was an odd dance, and Will wasn't sure if he was the one leading or following.

The older man made his way into the room, removed his suit jacket, and sat at the other end of the couch, a position they'd often found themselves in during conversations. Will closed the book, mentally noting the page, and laid it between them. Hannibal glanced over the title and seemed to approve.

"You left the ghosts behind?" Hannibal asked with interest.

"I left the graveyard. The ghosts are less easily shaken," Will answered. Then, he continued, "I'm not hearing Abel Gideon's voice in my head, if that's what you're asking."

"The question is yours to answer as you wish," Hannibal placidly responded, irritating in his courtesy. "Is your conscience troubling you?"

Will crossed his arms over his chest and looked at the fire when he responded, "I let a murderer go free. It should bother me that Alice Maynard is dead."

"Or you can release blame to Abel Gideon, the man whose hands were covered in blood last night. I'm quite sure yours were not," Hannibal retorted, an argument he'd essentially made before. Will glared, unconvinced. Hannibal looked thoughtful for a moment, staring into the fire as well. He tried again, "When Abel Gideon escaped, did he take a weapon?"

"Yes," Will replied with a glance at Hannibal through the corners of his eyes. "Guns from the guard and driver."

"Have they been recovered?"

Will shook his head, beginning to see where the train of thought might be going.

"When you came upon Abel Gideon in the woods, you released him based on instinct-- an instinct you trusted, Will. If you had chosen the nobler route, would you have succeeded, or would yours have been the name above Ms. Maynard's on his list of victims?" Hannibal turned to look at him, gauging his response.

It had been reckless to follow Gideon into the woods that night, alone and driven by a bloodier motive than justice. He hadn't considered the guns-- a glaring oversight, the kind he would have condemned his students for overlooking in a case study.

"You pretend the past is far more predictable than it could ever have been," Hannibal added.

Will ran a hand through his hair and took off his glasses, setting them on the book by his side. He lost himself in thoughts of that night and the dozen new scenarios that came to mind; Will could well have been killed, and he hadn't been aware of it. Hannibal's hand coming to lie on Will's shoulder called him back to the present. He didn't necessarily believe Gideon would have gotten the better of him, but the possibility existed.

Hannibal spoke again in a kinder tone, "And, perhaps selfishly, I prefer a world with Will Graham in it than one without." The warmth returned to his eyes, although his expression remained etched in stone.

Will again felt the stinging joy of being seen by another and deemed more than sufficient. It was not a feeling he was accustomed to in his personal life or had allowed himself to want. He had learned long ago not to place much value in others' opinions of him-- they were too ephemeral, too mercurial. He didn't trust them. It pained him how much his stomach twisted and heart raced, how much he wanted to believe Hannibal now. How much he *did* believe him.

"Your judgment has worsened," Will quipped, no venom in his voice.

He brought his own hand up to his shoulder and took Hannibal's in his own, the minute skin-to-skin contact more distracting than it had any right to be. They seemed to be moving nearer one another on the couch, though Will didn't remember angling closer. His free hand moved the book between them, a silent request for closeness. He turned his body fully to look into the other's man's eyes, a test of sincerity more than an admiring gaze. There was nothing there but the knowing glow that seemed to always be fixed on Will when they were together-- something Will was probably imagining in his current unsettled state but that was pleasant nonetheless.

Just as they had moved closer unknowingly, gravity pulling masses into one another's orbit, it wasn't clear who moved their locked hands to their sides and leaned forward, a welcome trespass.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

NSFW. Very.

I'm finally not traveling, so hopefully updates will become somewhat more frequent again. You all make me smile each time a chapter goes up ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️

There were few times in Will's life when he experienced the bliss of nothingness. The corridors of his mind reverberated with a cacophony of sounds day and night and had done so for as long as he could remember. When he was a child, his curiosity about the world around him and his sponge-like ability to absorb others' feelings led him to withdraw into himself, diving headlong into hobbies like model building and reading about mysterious sea creatures hiding in the depths of the oceans, yet even alone, his mind never ceased its churning. As a teenager, the condition worsened substantially as he became consumed by his knowledge of his own otherness and the compulsion to be normal-- whatever that was. College was a minefield of identity crises and indecision about what his life should look like, his father's blue-collar job not appealing to him but the white-collared business and pre-law students making him gag on the wafts of their pretentiousness. Life after college changed every few years as new and exciting traumas stumbled into his pathway.

Privately, though, Will suspected he would not have enjoyed what others might call peace of mind even if his life had been the picture of serenity; he simply wasn't built for quiet.

Yet, there had been stolen moments of perfect, white silence: the first tug of a fish on his line, the sight of a dog on the side of the road and the instant knowledge it belonged in front of his fireplace with the others, the purrs of a motor he spent days rebuilding. These bits of relief were painfully brief. However, recently, he had been given the gift of silence more frequently than during any previous era in his life; the trade, of course, was that these moments came from a place of intense oblivion. When Will saw Garrett Jacob Hobbs, he knew what was required of him; his mind did not need to narrate the experience or trouble itself over deciphering hidden clues. He looked, he knew, he went blank, and he shot. Likewise, killing Tobias Budge had given him many horrifically glorious minutes of deafening quiet, which were brought to an apex at the moment Will let his weight fall over Tobias and his hands wrap around his skull.

As a final testament to how irredeemably doomed he must be, Will recognized the remaining instances of consummate stillness were associated with his resuscitated physical desire. He found himself rapidly approaching that state on the floor of his former not-psychiatrist's living room, which was a hysterical thought in and of itself.

Their initial meeting of lips while sitting on the couch did not stop at a flirtatious brush. Instead, when skin met skin and breath was shared, Will's body moved of its own accord, teeth grazing a full lower lip, mouth sucking lightly at the flesh there. They were back in Wolf Trap, then, a glass of good wine in them, the night protecting them from the outside world, and bodies vibrating in a shared frequency. The slip and glide of a tongue left Hannibal's taste in Will's mouth, while the sliver of coherent thought he had remaining suggested it was an illusion brought on by chemicals and pheromones.

Whatever the cause, the reaction to the contact was the same: Will moved closer, wanting to feel and taste Hannibal from the inside out, to be coated in each other's sweat and scent as much as they were already drenched in one another's thoughts. It was a hungry, desperate feeling that pushed him closer and made his touch harder; it was met with equal force. Will had a hand on Hannibal's jaw and throat, applying almost too much pressure there; he thought of Alice Maynard's neck and relaxed his grip. His other hand had wandered to a strong ribcage and swept around to the solid expanse of clothed back. It was still an odd feeling-- intimately *touching* a man-- and not necessarily one Will relished in isolation; nevertheless, touching *this* man was becoming something like breathing-- a necessity, performed by involuntary action, and agonizing if stopped.

The hand stroking-- petting-- his hair was featherlight compared to the one that found its way to his lower back and massaged firm circles there. The sheer amount of touch overloaded Will's nervous system, synapses firing and misfiring, body tingling cold then overheating. He couldn't catch his breath fast enough to keep his chest from constricting with burning tension. The heat concentrated into electric waves as it traveled his body and settled in his lower stomach and, finally, hips. The devastating effect physical touch and desire had come to have on Will-- at least so far as his escalating relationship with Hannibal went-- numbed his inhibiting defensive pride just enough that he shifted uncomfortably on the couch, not quite grinding against his tightening slacks but not terribly far from it either. Will noticed with his last shards of humility that Hannibal's hand planted on his lower back must've felt the motion, as the man's teeth were bared in a nearly imperceptible grin against Will's own mouth. Will had a flash of an insane impulse to bite down hard on Hannibal's curved lip, but the thought, which disturbed him even through the lovely haze of arousal, sped away as quickly as it came.

The hand in Will's hair came to rest on his upper thigh, and the man's mouth-- with those imperfect, savage teeth Will had absently admired the night Hannibal had informed him of his encephalitis-- came to his jaw, right below his ear. Will exhaled shakily and shifted again, no embarrassment left as staggering need replaced all other thoughts. Hands were on buttons, and then shirts were open and sensitive flesh met sensitive flesh once more; Hannibal's mouth never diverted from its course along Will's jawline to his throat to his taut shoulders and then back again. Will enjoyed exploring foreign skin and the still alien sensation of rubbing fingertips in wound muscle, tickling body hair, and a sturdy frame. The thought of detecting these novel aspects of a male body in any other circumstance did not appeal to Will, but he was consumed by inhaling Hannibal's scent, tasting his mouth, feeling every curve and plane of his body.

From the base of Will's throat came a whispered question, the voice thicker and more accented than Will recalled, "What do you want?"

A sound between a weary sigh and a hushed moan came through Will's lips as he considered the question while Hannibal worked a nipping trail up Will's neck. They kissed again, tender but wet and wanting, a prelude. Hannibal pulled back slightly, eyes dark with his amber irises and blown pupils, and he held Will there just out of reach while he waited. It was infuriating and if Will hadn't dreamt of a similar scenario each night-- or if he wasn't so achingly hard from just making out like a craven teenager-- he would've refused to answer out of good, old-fashioned stubbornness. That wasn't the case, however, so Will's brain managed to light up with thought just enough to cobble together a response.

He leaned in close, butterfly kissing Hannibal's jawline in a teasing mockery of the man's own actions, and answered hoarsely in fragmented speech, "Touch you--" another zag of kisses, punctuated by one of Will's hands venturing down to the crisp leather belt "--touch me."

And Will would have remained completely unshaken, even rather proud of his ability to vaguely articulate what he wanted, if this response hadn't been followed by another surprise question from Hannibal, whose voice was barely audible now.

"With my *hands*?"

And the way he said the word *hands* made it sound like that was not Hannibal's first choice.

Will halted all action, mind momentarily liquefied while the rest of his body tensed and hardened. He hadn't considered an alternative possibility. Well, to be truthful, he may have *thought* of it, but it wasn't a serious idea at the time. He should've been prepared for this contingency, but it seemed outlandish to picture the well-dressed, commanding, polished doctor in a position that was so enormously different from sitting cross-legged in a plush office chair. It was not at all outlandish, though, to picture the pink-lipped, black-eyed man watching him, shirt open and hair hanging a touch messily, doing what had been ambiguously proffered.

This didn't, however, resolve the matter of reciprocation, which Will knew in his gut he needed more time to be ready for. He felt like a hypocrite at best accepting something he couldn't yet return.

He blinked twice, slowly, and attempted an answer.

"Hannibal," he said unsteadily in a breath, "I can't...for you…" he trailed off, feeling like he was rejecting someone he wanted to hold closely.

The older man didn't blink or flinch; no expression crossed his face when he replied with a familiar refrain: "I possess no expectation."

Will unconsciously licked his bottom lip and tightened the hand on Hannibal's side. He gave a small nod, an acknowledgement of Hannibal's previous statement and dazed permission to proceed. The image of Hannibal's mouth grazing his lower stomach when they were splayed out on Will's bed the previous week came to mind, and reasonable thought was no longer invited to participate in his decision-making process.

That was, most likely, how they ended up on the floor. Will was not sorry for how unseemly it must be.

The deep kissing continued for a few seconds, bodies pressed lengthwise together, Hannibal staying slightly to the side as he had during their previous evening. Will was still grateful for this positioning deep below the layers of his desire; it was not impossible that having a strong form pinning him would trigger panic, which tended to be a bit of a mood killer in Will's experience.

Blessed white stillness settled over him as Hannibal moved down his body, hands making quick work of all of the clothing separating Will's flesh from Hannibal's touch. Testing, teasing strokes down Will's now exposed length made his breath catch for a few seconds before he could release it. He knew there would already be drops of dampness, and he felt a sting of remorse that he was going to be receiving pleasure from someone else's discomfort. Lips kissing the skin of his stomach and leaving small, sucking bites drew his attention back to his body. The fingers were still working, stroking very slowly now in a loose circle. Will didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing that he was so quickly approaching his edge from such simple movements.

The hand was removed as soon as he noticed his proximity to the cliff, and Hannibal moved upward to kiss him again, gentler than before so that both could breathe for a moment. The break was short-lived, though, and Hannibal soon made a single, straight line of nips down Will's sternum, stomach, and lower abdomen. Will was torn as to whether or not he should watch what was occurring, so he took furtive glances and then closed his eyes tight. His eyes were closed when he felt the first warm lap of a tongue. He shuddered, made a small noise that sounded like the fragments of a moan, and glanced down to see the tongue dart from between two well-shaped lips to his gleaming tip. His lizard brain worked double time to ensure that image was engraved in his memory. When warm lips lightly covered the head immediately afterward, he pressed himself hard against the ground to stop from grinding upward. A breath later, he was being enveloped in a warm, tight suck that worked slowly from just above his base back to his tip, and he thought his heart would explode judging by the thudding beat in his ears and his sudden inability to take air into his lungs.

A few more slow, leisurely repetitions of the movement followed, and Will chanced another glance down. After the stunning shock of the sight faded a bit, he took in what he could of Hannibal's expression. The man looked focused and far from displeased or burdened by this action, which was a relief. The quickening movement of his mouth and the hand coming to assist in providing pressure suggested he might at least take pride in this specific skill set and that he could potentially even *enjoy* it, which pushed Will to a new level of arousal. Will couldn't cope with any of these lucid thoughts while he was in his current position, so he let the whiteness resume its dominion over his thoughts and allowed himself to feel the sensation of firm lips and gentle suction moving over him in a rhythm. He made tiny, slow, circular movements with his pelvis, not able to stop himself; the action went unstopped.

Will felt every muscle tightening and heat concentrating under Hannibal's mouth. He was very close from the combination of sensations and the mesmerizing sight of the other man taking Will into his mouth and further. Small panting noises came from Will's throat now with each skillful rise and fall. He put a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, hanging on a bit too

tightly but needing something to ground him. The heat and electric wires binding his hips were tensing to the point of aching, and Will choked out, “Hannibal,” as a warning. The other man’s eyes glanced upward in recognition, another sight that was stowed away for later reference, but he maintained his pace, and that knowledge more than anything else is what propelled Will clear over the precipice, the exquisite ache building to a crescendo then relenting to the pleasurable spasms of release. He arched his back but kept his hips ground down into the floor, and one hand continued squeezing Hannibal’s shoulder while the other came to cover his face, muffling the breathy, moaning noises trying to claw free.

When the sensitivity became too much, he turned a bit and accidentally laughed once, awareness returning to him. Hannibal kissed both thighs and just under his belly button, a sweet farewell, and then returned to his side. Will brought his other hand to his face now as well, and he laid there with elbows skyward and his face covered, body still giving the occasional shake as he relearned how to breathe and felt the opioid rush of post-orgasm chemicals flooding and warming his body. He freed one hand and brought it blindly to the back of Hannibal’s head, running it through his hair. He wanted to acknowledge the man-- let him know that although Will felt unimaginably awkward not to mention confused and shocked, he also felt warm and maybe even happy. It was too much to communicate, so he settled for the gentle touch.

They stayed that way for a long time, Will with one hand on his eyes and the other in Hannibal’s hair while Hannibal had one hand propped under him and the other laid flat against Will’s chest, feeling his heartbeat and breathing.

When Will finally opened his eyes, Hannibal’s were closed, and he looked neutral but unworried. Less guarded, perhaps, in this moment of calm.

Will brought his now-free hand to lay over Hannibal’s on his chest, getting the other man’s attention with the soft touch. In spite of the relaxed, sleepy fog settling over him, he was no less determined to make things marginally less unequal between them. He was also still nervous that he would discover he didn’t enjoy the experience when he was on the opposite end of the equation-- the giving end-- but that was all the more reason to quit delaying the experience.

Hannibal made no suggestion or indication of his own need, and the part of Will that was feeling particularly raw and vulnerable in that moment took it as a challenge. Will rolled to his side and pressed his mouth against waiting lips, letting his tongue caress gently inside. He still hadn’t caught his own breath, and he could hear himself exhaling hard. His fingers grazed Hannibal’s heated flesh from the base of this throat down his abdomen to his half-undone belt. Will clumsily finished unlooping the stiff leather and carefully unbuttoned the slacks and pulled the zipper, equally aware of how ridiculously expensive the material must be to replace if he caused a tear and how disorientingly thrilling it was to feel the physical manifestation of Hannibal’s desire under his palm.

Will worked the fabric down-- with a little help from the body wearing the clothing-- and couldn’t keep himself from briefly breaking their kiss to glance down and see the naked skin. Watching his own hand gingerly explore Hannibal’s erect flesh was more surreal than titillating at first. He had never felt another male body in this way, had never even seen one in

this state of arousal in person. The familiarity of knowing what his partner was feeling, based on Will's own experience receiving such action, and the strangeness of viewing his fingers touch another man as he had only touched himself was dizzying. He gave himself several moments of breathing and watching his fingers glide over the hardened length of an uncircumcised erection-- another thing Will really should have been prepared for, he thought, as he made a mental note to actually research a few topics of interest later.

It took too long for Will to notice Hannibal's eyes were not on the action between them but on Will's face. Will shot his gaze upward from under his brow, meeting the look. Hannibal was examining his expression, and another pang of guilt came through Will's clearer mind as he realized Hannibal was likely trying to find some unsavory emotion-- disgust, panic-- so that he could avert disaster.

Just as Will couldn't communicate his own enjoyment of Hannibal's actions, Will didn't have the words to assure the man that this wasn't the case. Will may have had some confusion or tentativeness, but seeing Hannibal's arousal-- for him, because of him-- was heady. He couldn't say there was anything specifically *attractive* about a male erection, but he also knew he wanted to touch the body that was open to him and that he had many years of experience only with female partners muddying these waters a bit. In short, he wasn't reluctant but was letting himself process the newness of the experience.

Lacking the ability to articulate this, Will kissed Hannibal hard, biting his lip and then letting his tongue massage into Hannibal's. He seemed to always get a response from nipping and biting, and when Will tightened his hand on the hard length in his grip and gave the first, slow stroke with his fingers in an O, he caught the bottom lip between his teeth and held for a fleeting second. The synchronous action pulled a gasping breath out of the other man, and Will thought hazily that this noise was the symphony he heard in his wilder dreams.

A few more testing drags elicited hard breathing into Will's mouth, and he found the whole sensory experience becoming more intoxicating than worrying. He dropped his teeth to Hannibal's neck, snaking his hand up rapidly to wetten it with saliva as had been done for him when the roles were reversed days ago. The wetness and freer movement of flesh allowed him to find an uneven rhythm that didn't quite match his nipping, sucking kisses but that seemed to be effective based on the man's breathing and complete rigidity. Will noticed Hannibal's hands pressed into the rug they were sprawled on, grasping there, and the sight of tight tendons hanging onto the floor in the firelight etched itself into Will's memory as much as the more vivid images he'd recently added there.

Hannibal's eyes were half-lidded and glazed in shiny blackness, his stare focused now on the movement between them. Will kept his mouth at the side of Hannibal's throat, a good place to apply those fanged kisses he seemed to prefer while also viewing his actions.

Will rapidly licked his palm again-- only briefly associating his own mouth and the flesh his hand was wrapped around-- and watched as transparent beads formed at Hannibal's tip. It was erotic and jarring, a reminder of where the current trajectory was soon going to lead. Will continued, undeterred if somewhat more anxious, and tried to read the cues in Hannibal's breathing, how it caught whenever his index finger pulled over the underside of his head or when his teeth sunk into the muscle above his collarbone. Hannibal was tense and mumbling

something that Will couldn't quite hear. He continued, still not completely in time or regular but effective nonetheless.

When Hannibal made a few small movements, painfully restrained thrusts, and closed his eyes to retreat into whatever exquisite universe lay within his mind, Will reassured himself that this was okay-- good, maybe great-- and continued.

When the hands working the rug stiffened into digging claws, Will's eyes cast downward.

When a broken moan-- a growling, animal sound echoing across the lobes of Will's brain-- was followed shortly by the feeling of contracting muscle and warmth on Will's still moving hand, he was more than a little proud that he did not falter or pause.

All movement stopped, Hannibal's talonlike grip relaxed, and the only noise in the darkened room was heavy inhaling and exhaling. Will let his forehead dip down and rest on Hannibal's sweat-dampened skin, closing his eyes and feeling the dueling surges of awkwardness at the position he found himself rather stuck in and the pure exhilaration of having caused Hannibal to blacken himself out from the world for a few moments of unrestrained gratification. Will felt shaky, distant in this space. They laid together in exhaustion more than comfort for several minutes, silence settling over them.

Hannibal was the first to move, craning to kiss the back of Will's neck lightly as he lifted himself up to his elbows. He surveyed the situation with eyes that were still too glassy. There was no clear exit that allowed them both to retain much dignity, and Will finally summoned the courage to assess how best to proceed. Hannibal made a concerned huff, and something about the scene-- how utterly distraught Hannibal looked as he tried to determine how to extricate himself without alarming Will, how obscenely *messy* sex was in ways that nobody mentioned, how romantic the backdrop for their frenzied attack of one another had been-- caused Will to laugh, a smothered chuckling that drew an inquisitive look from the other man.

"This was a terrible idea," Will said, mostly to himself, amusement in his tone and body still relaxed. He glanced at Hannibal and clarified uncomfortably, "This, here. Not--" he nodded between them "--*this*."

In a gravelly voice but with no shortage of humor, Hannibal commented wryly, "Your charm never ceases."

The light exchange normalized what was not at all a normal scene in Will's life, and they carefully got to their feet and retreated to separate restrooms-- Will to the guest washroom on the ground floor and Hannibal upstairs, presumably to the master bathroom-- to straighten themselves.

Will purposefully chose not to internalize this part of the encounter, deciding sometimes omissions were for the greater good. He wasn't to the point yet that cleaning fluids from his body was something he could do without a little bit of squeamishness, but he also wasn't deterred or upset by the idea. He just needed more time, and he didn't want to think himself into a panic. He also did not meet his own eyes in the mirror as he washed, not feeling ashamed and not willing to risk that momentary freedom by subjugating himself to his own

critique. He was loose and warm and numb, and the hormonal cocktail he had drifted on for the entire previous weekend was refilled.

Hannibal was already in the kitchen, a recipe card in front of him, when Will came to meet him again. Will stood next to him, a few inches too close but not touching, and saw that it was a fairly straightforward dill salmon dish.

“Want help?” he asked, falling back into a familiar pattern.

“I delight in your assistance,” Hannibal answered, courteous once more but with an air of good-humored facetiousness in light of their very recent activities.

Will assembled the cutting boards and knives while Hannibal collected the ingredients, and when Will handed Hannibal a gleaming chef’s knife-- as the man had so often offered one to Will-- the blonde man looked at the blade fondly, an unusual reaction for most but not so remarkable for this particular person. Hannibal took the knife with his right hand and caught Will with his left, a light touch on his waist. He pressed a soft, affectionate kiss to Will’s mouth, and then he turned to resume his work.

Ridiculously, Will felt himself flush. It wasn’t the contact but the context that struck him. They had enjoyed a few heated moments together now, but they hadn’t done this-- a gentle kiss for the sake of a kiss while cooking dinner together. It felt so exceedingly normal and like something a couple might do, and this thought jarred Will’s mind perhaps more than anything else that evening.

They made dinner side-by-side, mostly without speaking, though Will did ask about Hannibal’s research. It was effortless conversation, no philosophy. Will wondered if the other man was also too drained to engage in their usual sparring, and it didn’t seem like a bad thing if he was. Nothing seemed particularly bad or wrong with the world at the moment, and Will knew this was a delusion but couldn’t quite force himself to confront the lie.

When it was eventually time for him to go, the sun having set and his dogs likely starting to get impatient, Hannibal followed him to the door. There was no kiss goodbye, but there was a shadow of a smile in the crinkle of Hannibal’s eyes and the corners of his mouth, and Will found that this sight was a better farewell anyway.

On the drive home, Will let the reel of the night play on a loop, leaving him heated and preoccupied by lingering incredulity and half-hearted embarrassment. It was harder to get embarrassed now than it was before-- not impossible by any stretch, but noticeably more difficult.

The dogs greeted him with their usual enthusiasm, sniffing the smells of Hannibal’s body and home on Will’s clothing.

“No treats, guys,” he told them as he scruffed Max’s fur. They had come to associate the smell of Hannibal with rewards, and Will sourly thought for a microsecond that maybe Hannibal had conditioned all of them that way. He pushed the ugly, intrusive thought aside with ease and took his gang for a nighttime walk around the edge of the field, letting them run ahead and play as he stretched his own legs in the cold air.

He slept hard that night and had only one distorted dream of shining blades and sincere, throaty laughter, which he couldn't precisely recall the next morning. It was not a nightmare.

At the 9:00 AM lab debriefing on Alice Maynard's body and evidence from the scene, Will focused himself on the matter at hand, putting on his best mental blinders. Seeing Alice's body on the cold, stainless steel gurney made the task of pushing aside the previous night less challenging.

Price, Zeller, and Beverly stood before Jack and Will, the body forming a barrier between the two groups.

Zeller began, "Cause of death is no surprise: Asphyxia by strangulation. The pattern of the contusions on the anterior neck and secondary signs--"

"Petechiae, fractured hyoid bone," Price interjected, pointing to Alice's empty eye sockets and throat.

"--support that she was strangled with fabric, not bare hands. The ribbon was the murder weapon."

"But it's not a ribbon," Beverly added, picking up the gold fabric with her gloved hands. "It's a stole. Dr. Maynard was a graduate of Johns Hopkins University's doctoral program, class of 2014. The stole was from her undergraduate ceremony, though."

"Which you know...how?" Jack questioned.

"Facebook. Gotta keep up with the kids, Agent Crawford," she returned with self-satisfied brightness.

"Was her home broken into?" Will asked Jack.

He nodded, then said, "No forced entry-- the door was cracked open with the key still in the lock. The intruder went through her bedroom. We didn't think he took anything."

"Guess Gideon's collecting souvenirs," Will replied.

"That's also where he removed her eyes," Beverly added, drawing Will back to her. "We found a grapefruit spoon with tissue in the serrated edges. Looks like he tried a teaspoon first, though."

Will's own eyes burned at the thought, and he blinked them shut for a moment before opening them again, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

"We can confirm it's Gideon. He didn't even try to hide it-- fingerprints, hair, a few drops of blood...she put up a fight," Beverly maintained her professionalism as always, but Will sensed a hint of admiration in her final words.

“He wasn’t trying to hide,” Will bitterly asserted, “his goal is to be found by the Ripper. There’s no reward in cleaning up after himself anymore.”

Beverly continued, not finished yet, “We also found the connection: Alice was mentored by Dr. Chilton. Gideon was already a patient at the hospital.”

“Guilt by association,” Zeller commented.

Will corrected, “Guilt by negligence. She saw something and didn’t report it.”

“There’s no way to know that,” Zeller countered, annoyed.

Will frowned, frustrated, and leaned down toward the dish containing Alice Maynard’s disembodied gaze. From this position, he shot back, “Her eyes were removed with a grapefruit spoon. How do you interpret that?”

Zeller didn’t say anything more, though Will could tell it was only because Jack had begun to glower at the two men’s arguing.

Looking back at Beverly, Will noticed she had an odd expression on her face, a curious, eager look. He noted it, ignored it, then asked, “Did she only attend Johns Hopkins?”

Beverly nodded, seeing Will process the full span of information.

“He chokes her with a stole from one university, leaves her body at another, and her eyes at a third? What’s the message?” Jack inquired, looking between Beverly and Will.

“He’s arranging a meeting,” Will answered, the pieces coming together. “He wants the Ripper to come to him, so he gave him a location.”

“But which campus?” Jack asked.

Will sighed, removed his glasses so that he could swipe a hand across his eyes, then put the frames back on.

“None of them,” Will replied. “It's a process of elimination. He’s telling the Ripper where *not* to go. All three are universities, so he’ll pick somewhere similar-- not a community college.”

Jack crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side in thought, following Will but clearly thinking through the implications of this line of reasoning.

“It’ll be a circus if the media finds out two serial killers are arranging a rendezvous at a college. We have to get officers on every campus near the city,” Jack concluded to himself, eyes looking slightly upward instead of at any one person.

“But if we find Gideon…,” Will added, knowing Jack would fill in the rest.

“We might find the Ripper.”

Jack sighed thoughtfully, then nodded again and left the room without further conversation.

“Does that mean we’re done?” Price asked, looking between Beverly and Zeller. “Why does nobody say goodbye anymore?”

Beverly shook her head, then caught Will’s eyes.

“Want to splurge on some dining hall coffee? My treat,” she offered brightly, removing her gloves.

“I’ve got class soon,” Will said, noncommittal.

Beverly led him out of the room anyway, saying, “Then we’ll get a coffee on the way to your class.”

It wasn’t a suspicious amount of insistence coming from Beverly, but it was bordering on odd. When they were out of the BAU wing, a Cheshire smile spread over her face, and while she didn’t look at him, Will sensed a menacing glee emanating from her.

“Is that a defensive wound on your chest, Agent Graham?” she slyly inquired.

Will understood now why she had looked at him so oddly when he leaned over Alice Maynard’s eyes-- his collar must’ve gaped open a bit, revealing a purple bruise on his fair skin. He had a few hidden away this morning.

Will let out a shaky exhale and rubbed his fingertips against his temple, feeling pressure but not pain. He knew his face was reddening.

“It’s impolite to stare,” he tossed out as a weak comeback.

“And it’s in my actual job description to evaluate wound patterns,” Beverly returned, still smiling.

“Oh, god,” Will finally relented, not enough oxygen reaching his brain to formulate a more eloquent rebuttal as he held his breath.

Beverly chuckled at that and softened.

“Hey, I’m just giving you a hard time. Seeing Will Graham with a hickey is like watching my grandma go skiing,” Beverly explained. “She was pretty good, by the way.”

Will rubbed his hands over his eyes again, not feeling substantially better at the comparison.

“Got anything good to tell me?” she pried, friendly.

“No,” he immediately answered.

“Anything *bad* to tell me?” she pushed, exaggerating the word. Will gave another pained exhale, wanting to disappear into the beige walls.

They arrived at the dining hall and got their coffee, Beverly paying as promised. On the walk toward the classrooms, she tried again.

“Come on-- I’m excited for you. At least, I want to be excited. Is this a dating kind of thing or just a...biting kind of thing?” she questioned, no judgment in her voice.

Will took a sip of the too-hot coffee while he tried to think of the most innocuous detail he could give her to satisfy her curiosity. He didn’t let the fact that he himself couldn’t quite answer her most recent question bother him too much-- at least not at that moment.

“It’s just...a thing? I don’t know what it is,” he conceded.

“Okay, I can work with that,” she remarked. “Have you just started seeing her--” and Will must have contorted his face in some microexpression that Beverly’s remarkably astute observational skills caught because she amended “--or him?”

Will hadn’t intended on telling her anything further, but her tiny adjustment in phrasing unexpectedly encouraged him. He was brimming with emotion and thoughts, and at least a few of them tried to climb their way out of his throat.

“Kind of? We’ve been friends. Are still friends,” Will haltingly explained. Then, with a wave of nausea and bravery, he added, “Me and him.”

Beverly did an admirable job containing herself, though Will could see from the strained muscles of her jaw that she wanted to smile and say something that would horrify him, like ‘Congratulations.’

Proving again that she knew Will better than he thought, she responded neutrally, “I hope everything works out.” She couldn’t stop herself from adding, “And if you ever want to talk about *anything*...”

Will didn’t suppress the half-smile and dry laugh that came at that, so he took a quick sip of coffee to correct himself.

They walked companionably most of the way back. Right before they got to the wing of classrooms, Will glanced over and asked, “How’s your sister?”

Beverly rolled her eyes and groaned, “Let me tell you about last weekend…”

Will gladly listened to her story of her sister being found asleep under a pool table in a honky tonk, and the conversation and the coffee warmed his chest in equal measure.

It was a good day.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

▓NSFW

We'll get back to the main plot next chapter. I appreciate the encouragement to explore the physical aspect of the guys' relationship more; it's such an interesting way to show their changing dynamics and comfort levels. Thank you for all of the wonderful comments-- I always look forward to reading them! ❤️

Tuesday and Wednesday both held a rosy glow for Will. Nobody died, Abel Gideon was not spotted on any of the Baltimore-area campuses, Jack did not present a new crisis, and Will had space to enjoy these facts while still looking forward to Wednesday evening's weekly dinner. His life felt easy and quiet, hopeful even. These were entirely alien concepts, and Will, frankly, did not trust them whatsoever. His experience thus far in his more than three decades of existence had taught him time and again that when the animals outside his door stopped howling and screeching, it was only because a fiercer predator was circling his home. It wasn't Gideon-- Gideon was unhinged and an annoyance, not frightening-- and it wasn't exactly the Ripper. It was something else, larger and unknown, lurking in the shadows.

With this knowledge firmly rooted in the closest quarters of his mind, Will stole the moments of happiness he could while steeling himself against the inevitable assault.

Wednesday afternoon, Hannibal sent Will a message-- a rare occurrence-- telling him that he would come to Wolf Trap for the evening, meal in tow. Will didn't argue, and moreover, he found he did not want to fight the man's offer. Will's painful awareness of others, including their sense of right and wrong and fairness, was turned on its side when it came to Hannibal Lecter; Will suspected there were no favors between them even though it felt like he ought to owe the other man something for the countless meals, his caretaking when Will was ill, and, more recently, his unmitigated willingness to provide physical pleasure in ways Will couldn't quite summon the courage to attempt. Will never sensed the slightest hint Hannibal was waiting to be repaid for any of this; when the man said there was no expectation, his words were honest. It was all selfless in a way Will did not know and in a way he couldn't imagine Hannibal had often practiced.

After work, Will had enough time to straighten up and take the dogs on a walk so they would not be bouncing across the floor when Hannibal arrived. Regardless, when they heard the sound of tires on gravel, they circled the door, eyes wide and pleading for treats. Winston was the most reserved, sitting back a little from the group; Max was the most insistent, repeatedly half-standing to tip tap on the floor before sitting back down again. Will felt a surge of pure love for the group and didn't scold them for crowding Hannibal as he entered and pulled the

much-anticipated treats from a bag in his pocket. While Hannibal was not what Will would characterize as a “dog person,” he gamely greeted the pack and gave them his offering, a half-smile on his face as he said their names and held out a small round of sausage to each. Will didn’t let himself think consciously about how much of his powerful feeling might bleed over to the man encircled by his family.

All of the dogs properly recognized, Hannibal picked up the familiar cooler by his side. Will felt like the one begging for a treat now as he silently guessed at the contents. The fair-haired man’s eyes were gleaming that night, warm mahogany, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile more quickly than usual. Will trailed him into the kitchen, watching this interesting version of the man. There was no air of artifice, as there was when Hannibal had gone cold to Will after their tense, shared moment at the sink weeks ago or as there was when Will saw the man interact with people like Jack. Will looked him up and down scrutinizingly as he unpacked the cooler, food forgotten for the time. Hannibal’s shoulders and limbs were relaxed, not odd for Hannibal, and he had ditched the waistcoat, tie, and suit jacket at some point between his office and Wolf Trap, probably trading them out for the cooler when he went home between the two locations.

A tranquil contentment radiated off of him, in his movements and under his speech, a dozen tiny tells nobody else would have seen. For God’s sake, Will was sure he even heard the man humming for a few seconds as he worked.

Eventually, sensing Will observing him, Hannibal turned, rolling his sleeves up his muscled but not bulky forearms-- Will felt a small jolt of surprise at stumbling upon this new appreciation of the decidedly masculine feature-- and kept the same half-grin on his face as he looked at Will questioningly.

“You’re in an awfully good mood this evening,” Will stated, moderating his tone. He didn’t want to be the jerk who made someone feel bad for being anything other than morose.

Hannibal finished rolling his sleeves and walked toward Will, stopping only a foot away.

“Does my good humor offend you?” he asked, unworried.

“It intrigues me,” Will answered honestly. “I wonder at the cause.”

“The heavens occasionally align and all of life presents the opportunity for delight. One must revel, not question-- circumstances change soon enough.”

Will chewed the flowery sentiments over in his mind, then replied, “That was a whole lot of words to say nothing.”

Hannibal chuckled, the smile spreading fully to his eyes even as his lips remained barely parted.

“A project that has caused me some distraction has been completed. Call my good mood clarity,” Hannibal said, unperturbed by Will’s examination.

“Clarity? I didn’t realize Hannibal Lecter could exist in any other state,” Will taunted without animosity.

Hannibal’s smile faded from his lips, but his eyes retained the full warmth. He brought a hand to Will’s face and inched a tiny step closer, their chests almost touching. He brushed a thumb across Will’s cheekbone and looked his face up and down, drinking in the sight.

“Recently, my sight has been blurred. I have very rarely been subject to this phenomenon. But now, the clouds have begun to part,” Hannibal spoke softly, thoughtfully, and kept his palm pressed to Will’s face.

“And out comes the sun?” Will provided lamely, jarred by the idea of Hannibal being unclear on any point in his life and terribly curious as to what had caused this uncertainty.

“Yes,” Hannibal breathed out, and if Will were a more romantic man, he would have sworn that Hannibal looked at him as though he were the burning star in question.

It was a tremendously human exchange, and it tugged at the loose threads of affection already unspooling in Will’s stomach. He edged closer, pressed a gentle, chaste kiss to the smooth lips waiting for him, and let his eyes shine with the smile that so rarely made its way to his mouth.

Hannibal started to turn to resume prep work, but Will’s fingers-- acting of their volition-- caught Hannibal’s arm. He pulled him back, kissing again, deeper but not quite sensual. They stood like this for a few minutes, taking small tastes of one another; it was unhurried and, if Will wasn’t still so keenly sensitive to the newness of touch, it might have been relatively innocent. Hannibal tilted his head away, withdrawing. He brought his head next to Will’s and rested it there so they were temple to temple.

“Would you like dinner?” he asked, not the question Will expected to hear. Will was too surprised to laugh.

He felt his face and ears burn with a blush as he haltingly suggested, “Can it...wait? I mean, it’s fine if…,” he didn’t know where the words were headed, so he let them stop before reaching their destination.

Hannibal’s eyes flickered open, and he pulled back enough to look Will fully in the face. Will forced his eyes to meet the other man’s instead of turning to a nondescript point on the ceiling.

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous,” Hannibal said, a question in his voice.

Will stifled a sigh, and he thought of how cautious Hannibal had been in their physical interactions compared to his boldness in every other facet of his life. It was appreciated-- necessary, maybe-- but Will was not so delicate or capricious as others assumed. He did not want to hold someone else’s desires hostage.

“Presume. I’ll tell you if I’m not okay,” Will plainly proclaimed, keeping his gaze locked on the dark eyes staring at him. It was a vow both to Hannibal and to himself.

A flip switched somewhere in their small world at Will's words, and the leisurely pace of their earlier kissing evolved into a focused, burning exchange.

Minutes later, Will had somehow in their increasingly frenzied interactions come to be sprawled so that his feet were planted firmly on the ground while his upper body was laid on his bed. He marveled at the power words held over Hannibal, a power he didn't understand or know how to exercise judiciously yet. And when he found himself again being taken into a mind-numbingly enthusiastic mouth, all thoughts of power and words ceased for a few blissful minutes, only the other man-- now, incredibly, on the floor between Will's legs-- mattered.

In the safety of his home, far from busy streets and echoing hallways, Will gave himself greater freedom to let appreciative, strangled noises come from his throat. Yet, at the point of aching closeness, Will reached a hand down and paused the wonderful, skillful movements. Hannibal sat back on his heels, looking at Will's eyes to identify the reason for the sudden stop. Every inch of Will's heated body wanted nothing more than to let the man resume and take him over the cliff he was standing at the precipice of, but Will's mind-- emerging through the haze-- encouraged him in another direction.

He had realized after their last encounter that he might be more willing to push his own boundaries when he was desperate for release than when he had been given that tantalizing gift. He wanted to test his theory, but that meant stopping *now*..

Will sat up enough to grasp Hannibal's shoulders and drag him onto the bed. Will fleetingly, blackly thought that it wasn't only Hannibal who had the physical capacity to inflict pain-- even kill-- if he so chose; it was disconcerting and comforting to realize this. They both edged upward, although their legs were on the floor and Hannibal was half-standing, one knee on the bed to keep himself raised and the other planted on the ground. Will took a few deep breaths, acknowledging the fleeting panic of having a larger body on top of his own, not quite holding him to the mattress but certainly caging him there. Panic flitted across his chest but didn't linger, the electricity in his veins still pulsing in too-strong currents.

Will's eyes flickered over to his bedside table, he looked up at Hannibal's fascinated face, and he whispered, "Drawer."

The man obeyed without question, saw what he had been sent for, and pulled the bottle from the drawer, placing it on the bed next to them. He looked apprehensive again, obviously unsure where Will was going with this repositioning and request for lubricant. Will reached down to undo the belt and work off the pants still at Hannibal's waist. He looked between them to prevent fumbling, and the sight made him dizzy: Two definitively male bodies, Will's obscenely and now saliva-sticky erection caught between them. His theory had thus far proven correct, though, as his impulse was not to move away in revulsion but to seek more of the contact that had brought him to that state. He sensed Hannibal watching him, face only inches above his own. He felt the man's staggering breath and heard the small sound that stayed in his throat when he was exposed.

Before Will could do much more, he was being overcome with wet, exploring kisses again, teeth barely concealed when Hannibal pulled at his lip. When the mouth fell to his neck, he took the opportunity to grab the bottle and slicked his right hand. Hannibal had to have been

aware of what Will was doing, yet when the properly lubricated hand wrapped around him, he exhaled hard through his nose and curled his head downward.

With freer motion and less worry that his touch might be uncomfortable, Will gave a few firmer strokes, finding delight in how Hannibal couldn't seem to focus on properly sucking at Will's clavicle and being touched in this way at the same time.

Will took over then, feeling more assured of himself and thoroughly beginning to enjoy the luxury of disrupting the generally self-possessed man's functioning. With his free hand, Will stroked through Hannibal's hair, letting the man's head hang over Will's shoulder as Hannibal remained raised on his forearms and knee. Will was working his way to a good rhythm, when he felt the man thrust toward the slick hand. It jarred him for a moment-- essentially being thrust *at*-- something completely new in his sexual life, but the sound of jagged breathing coming from Hannibal, the one who had so readily dropped to his knees to bring ecstasy, encouraged Will to push aside his momentary unease.

Hannibal picked up on the moment of discomfort and went still for a few seconds, breathing hard but not moving. Will removed the hand from Hannibal's hair and put it on his lower back and pressed down while he moved the hand between them upward again in a slow stroke. The message was received, and they continued, the pace more frantic now than before.

Will brought his mouth to the stretched expanse of neck and shoulder above his face. He continued experimenting, reading Hannibal's reactions to the different types of stimulation: light kisses, sucking kisses, nips. He found that, as before, teeth got the most dramatic response, sighing moans escaping the man above him. He started with small presses of his canines into the skin between neck and shoulder; he progressed to dragging his upper teeth there. It became obvious that the more force used, the better the response from the other man, so in Will's current state-- overloaded senses, throbbingly aroused, and feeling more powerful than he thought he could underneath another human-- he pushed the boundary.

For his part, Hannibal appeared to be rapidly disconnecting from the world, eyes closed, hips moving smoothly, body shaking and shuddering frequently as breathy, groaning noises came from his chest. It was the single most erotic experience Will could recall, and he had, in large part, brought them to this point. That intoxicating thought spurred him to bite down hard enough to taste a metallic tang-- the bite harder than he had meant-- but Hannibal said his name in a tone that was so far from angry or hurt that it took Will a moment to process it; then, the older man was gone into the oblivion.

After a few moments of shaky stillness, the sound of panting filling the room, Hannibal lifted himself up more fully again, off of his forearms and onto his hands. Will could only imagine the expression on his own face, as he could not quite control it. He pictured himself flushed from desire, a little stunned, uncomfortably aware of the fact his midsection would need to be cleaned sooner rather than later, and fixated on the blood welling at Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal looked wild, dark and unreadable but illuminating the room with the intensity of his singular focus on Will. He brought a finger to Will's mouth and withdrew it, and Will saw a small smudge of blood. There was no horror in Hannibal's expression-- far from it-- and he did not hesitate to press a hard kiss onto Will's mouth.

As soon as they parted, he resumed his previous position, Will only somewhat less hard than before from the distractions of the previous minutes. With a renewed fervor and a litany of vivid images now bounding through his mind, it did not take long for him to reach the apex once more and come crashing down as the release of pressure and waning electric spasms brought him back to earth.

Hannibal disappeared, came back with two small towels in hand, and collapsed heavily by Will's side. He had the decency to keep his eyes closed in faux fatigue while Will numbly dragged a towel over his midsection, enough to control the immediate issue at least. Will was too far gone to experience the full breadth of awkwardness that would later come to him when he thought back to that moment.

They laid in silence, breath and heartbeats steadying. Will idly became aware of how utterly covered in one another they were: saliva, sweat, blood, semen. They were living crime scenes. The thought should have elicited more disgust than it did.

When his body had calmed and his mind was again operational, Will glanced at Hannibal beside him. The man was analyzing Will again, assessing him. It was no longer so concerning when Hannibal did this-- it was his nature to dissect, and he had never given any indication that his evaluation of Will found any defect.

Hannibal noticed the glance and ran a hand through Will's damp curls.

"If I devoted every moment of my life to the study of your mind, you would still surprise me," he said, unexpectedly honest.

"That's commonly called instability," Will remarked. Hannibal's glittering eyes did not dim at the comment. "We should shower," Will said firmly, gesturing at the entirety of the current scene. "I'll go upstairs."

It was an obvious escape, but Will had temporarily reached his maximum level of vulnerability.

He had only used the upstairs shower once, the first night he moved in. The next morning, his bedroom had been relocated to the ground floor, and the upstairs bathroom was abandoned along with the rest of the rooms. It was a ghostly realm, an abdicated kingdom Will wasn't particularly proud to be the ruler of.

He grabbed a change of clothes and retreated to the sanctuary of the tiny upstairs bathroom; the shower struggled to rise above tepid. Feeling high on the swirl of endorphins, serotonin, and oxytocin still coursing through his bloodstream, he pressed his hands against the cold porcelain of the sink and looked at the man staring back at him in the mirror. He looked disheveled and more than a little indecent, but he was relieved that he recognized himself wholly. There wasn't a blush of shame or furrow in his brow. His intense moments with Hannibal might have shaken him and forced him to reconsider his previously definite sexuality, but he wasn't running from the challenge. He was steady on his feet. For now.

Will showered quickly, the water still not entirely warm. Changing, he realized he should probably have asked Hannibal if he'd like fresh clothing as well. Will had enough oversized

attire that he could cobble something together, although the man would not be especially pleased by the plebeian fabric touching his skin. Will finished quickly and jaunted down the stairs, feet heavy on the wooden steps. He heard the water still running, so he rapped on the door then cracked it a sliver.

“Will?”

There was no delicate way to ask if someone’s clothing had been ruined by body fluids.

“Sorry-- I, uh, changed. Do you need something to wear?”

There was a brief pause, then Hannibal answered from behind the curtain, hesitant voice relaying his reluctance, “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

Will knew he wasn’t saying that to be polite-- the man probably was truly horrified by the prospect. He would live, though. Before closing the door, Will thought over his options, figuring he should give Hannibal some choice in apparel. However, as it seemed to often do when he was in this fuzzy headspace with the older man, Will’s mouth worked without his approval.

“Flannel shirts, sweatpants...or sleeping clothes.”

Standing outside the door still, Will dragged a hand over his traitorous mouth, trying to get a leash on his thoughts. The seconds spent listening to the water splash into the tub were harrowing for Will’s mounting anxiety. The two of them had spent so many weeks tiptoeing toward friendship, then dancing around flirtation; now, it seemed they were rocketing forward. It felt dangerous and right, like they had never not shared a world of their own, whether it was as friends or more.
“Is this an invitation or pity?” Hannibal questioned at last, amused but serious.

“I don’t practice pity,” Will replied instantly.

“Then I accept the last option,” Hannibal said, still hidden by the shower curtain and muffled by running water.

Not saying anything more, Will retrieved a pair of blue and black flannel pajama pants and a white t-shirt that fit him a bit loosely. Will slipped through the door, put the clothes on the counter, and hurried back out. He wandered aimlessly to the kitchen and poked around the mostly-packed cooler, everything he touched still chilled. Hannibal would be glad to find good food hadn’t gone to waste.

Based on the contents of the steel box, Will assumed it was meant to be a kind of stew with rustic bread. He only got that far at deciphering the intended meal before he heard Hannibal’s bare feet walking across the floor toward him. He turned his head to inquire about the mystery dishes, but he was stopped by the unexpectedly satisfying sight of Hannibal in familiar, strikingly casual clothing. Will had never been possessive of people-- of his home and privacy, sure-- but he felt his chest strain with it now. He remembered wearing Hannibal’s clothing the night he had gone to Baltimore before dawn, drenched from the snow, and he recognized in his bones how strongly a man like Hannibal would’ve been

moved. Hannibal had hidden it terrifyingly well. Will felt *crazy* and affectionate to a flustering degree.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked Hannibal in a flat voice.

Hannibal came to stand next to him and sorted through the items.

“Braised pork stew and seeded sourdough. Each season brings new menus, but meals in the winter are required to nourish more than the body,” Hannibal answered conversationally.

He got a stock pot from Will’s cabinet and emptied the meat into it, the glassy juice and rich color a feast for the eyes. Will sliced the bread and set the table while Hannibal continued his task. Eating at the kitchen table together, both men in comfortable sleep clothes, both still warmed from each other’s touch, Will savored the moment more than the food. They ate in an amiable quiet, and by the time they were finished, a delicious exhaustion settled over Will. Hannibal cleared the table while Will changed the top sheet of the bed and brought a second quilt from the linen closet, unsure of Hannibal’s sleep preferences. The easy domesticity of it was soothing; Will couldn’t keep himself from feeling a sinking worry that this would end in spectacular fashion one day, sullying these golden moments in his memory.

Shaking off the melancholy fog around him, Will joined Hannibal again in the kitchen, drying the dishes as Hannibal washed them.

“Rather quiet this evening,” Hannibal observed, not looking over.

Will dried a bowl and replied, “Could say the same. No more gems of philosophy you want to impart?”

An amused “hmm” sound came from the man as he handed over a spoon.

“Is that what you require?”

Will sighed, shifted on his feet, and accepted the bread knife. He could lie or brush off the question well enough, but he knew where that led him: confusion, uncertainty, wasted time and energy. How long had he spent shying away from asking questions that ought to be asked because he’d rather live in the gray of ambiguity?

He carefully stated, “I understand what to do when life is hard; I know what’s real.”

Hannibal licked his bottom lip and let his head drop a bit, hearing the spoken and unspoken words. Will knew what to do when life was hard; he did not know what to do when it was easy.

“Associating pain and reality fortifies a mind against the dangers of the world as effectively as it does the pleasures. Are you unable to relax your barriers, or do you question if there is a reason to risk doing so?”

Hannibal’s tone verged on professional, a sickening realization. Will didn’t respond, informing him it was the second, more hurtful, option.

Hannibal drained the sink and dried his hands on a towel, then turned his body toward Will.

“Man pretends the future is a land we need only arrive at. It’s a notion that nurtures complacency and blindness. Neither you nor I have that luxury-- or burden. I admit, in any relationship, there is a greater chance for sorrow than joy.”

“Is this what you tell your patients?” Will asked sarcastically.

“Only if the possibility of weathering those sorrows with another is within their grasp,” Hannibal concluded, watching Will for a reaction.

Will held his face in a neutral expression, needing time to think over the words. He chose to push on, through the unease.

“What does it mean...to be together?”

He cringed at his own question, hating how raw and needy it sounded. Hannibal’s face wavered between stone and openness, his eyes seeking but his face otherwise drawn tightly into angular lines.

“What would you like it to mean?”

Will crossed his arms and exhaled audibly, not wanting this responsibility.

“We’re more than friends,” he offered, starting with common ground. Hannibal blinked once, slowly, a signal that he wanted to say something cutting but was restraining himself. Will knew that particular look well.

“Are there other people you’re *more than friends* with?” Will inquired, now looking anywhere but Hannibal. It was a reasonable question-- one that should’ve probably been asked prior to any physical contact-- but it felt profane.

“No, nor is there any desire or intention,” Hannibal responded tersely. He sounded just short of insulted when he asked, “Need I ask the same of you?”

And there was the familiar sting of guilt, even if Will’s inquiries were technically appropriate.

“No, *no*,” Will shook his head emphatically and raked his fingers through his hair. He saw Hannibal’s shoulders dip back minutely, relaxing a bit. “Everything about you-- us-- is just...different. I didn’t want to *presume*,” he echoed Hannibal’s earlier words, reminding him that their apprehension may surface in different places but it existed in both of their spheres.

Hannibal relaxed his jaw and let his eyes fall to the floor, obviously thinking through their conversation.

“Then we agree?” he finally, simply, asked, not hurt but less warm.

Will nodded, stepped closer, and placed a hand on his shoulder, just next to where the wound from Will’s teeth would be under the t-shirt. He rejected all of the placating words and phrases that floated to his throat, none of them right or necessary. He waited for Hannibal to

meet his eyes, and he held the gaze once the man did. He hoped Hannibal could read what was there.

When the taller man leaned to rest his forehead against Will's, it seemed they had reached a tentative understanding. They stood in the kitchen, unmoving, for a few minutes, until the sounds of small dog feet approaching them drew Will's attention. Buster stared up at them curiously.

"I need to let them out," Will explained, and Buster led him out of the room, looking over his shoulder every few steps to make sure his owner understood he was being summoned.

The gang darted into the yard quickly, and almost just as swiftly, they ran back inside. The night was bitterly cold, not refreshing even for Max, who loved the cold. Will locked up the front door, checked the back door again, as he always did, and found Hannibal already sitting on his bed, flipping through a book from one of the shelves. The man looked at home there, slumped against the wall with his stretched legs donning the well-worn flannel pants as though it was a pair of tailored slacks. He set the book aside when he saw Will, and he adjusted in the bed to get the sheets loose.

Every muscle and nerve in Will's body was drained of any semblance of energy. His exhaustion even outweighed the awkwardness of crawling into bed with another person-- a man, at that. He turned the bedside light off and sunk down under the covers. He wasn't sure how this part of the evening-- negotiating how to sleep together-- would work. He stayed flat on his back but turned his head to see what he could of Hannibal in the dark room. The man was lying on his side, facing Will.

Before Will could stumble out a vague, accidentally offensive question again, Hannibal leaned over, kissed him tenderly, and said, "Good night."

The other man rested back on his side, giving Will space but not shying away, and they fell asleep in this way: Hannibal curved toward Will but not touching him, and Will resting on his back with his head turned toward Hannibal and his hand just short of lying against the man's stomach. Will warm and felt the familiar presence without suffocating on it. He drifted to sleep soon after his eyelids shut.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Have I told you all that you're amazing? Because you're amazing ❤️ Hope you all enjoy, and I look forward to hearing from you!

4:47 AM was an ungodly time to receive a phone call.

The shrill chiming, which hadn't seemed so grating when Will made it Jack's dedicated ringtone, broke through the Do Not Disturb setting, and Will awoke with a jerk. He popped up onto his elbows and took a second to wake up enough to understand the source of the disruption. The body next to him lay still, but in the light from the window, he could see Hannibal's eyes were open. The irritation in Hannibal's straight line of a brow and tightly drawn mouth told Will he shouldn't answer, although the man remained quiet.

Will breathed a tired sigh and picked up the screaming phone. He cleared his throat, voice still thick with sleep.

"Yes?" he answered, letting Jack hear how unappreciated the wake-up call was even though they both knew Will would go wherever Jack pointed.

"Freddie Lounds has been found."

Will sat up fully. Jack wouldn't call him in the early morning hours to deliver good news.

"It's the Ripper."

"Where are you?"

"A farm outside the city. I'll send you coordinates-- he left her in the middle of a field."

"We're sure it's the Ripper, not Gideon?"

"No. That's why we need you."

A strained exhale came through his nose as he recalled how he had come to be the resident expert on the two murderers.

"Okay," he agreed, signing himself up to follow Jack on another trek through darkness and snow.

"Let me know when you're on the road."

The agent didn't wait for Will to reply. Even during their brief talk, Will could feel the ripples of Jack's anger-- the special blend he reserved for the Chesapeake Ripper. His mood would not improve standing out in the cold waiting for his best bloodhound to arrive.

Will put the phone down and rubbed his hands over his eyes, tired now from both the lack of sleep and the prospect of diving back into the closed mind of the Ripper. He turned to Hannibal, not apologetic but not proud either. The man's face had reset itself into nonchalant curiosity.

"Freddie Lounds' body's been found," Will stated without emotion.

Hannibal didn't flinch. Will would not have expected him to upon hearing this news.

Will went on, "Jack needs me to confirm it was the Ripper."

The older man's chest rose and fell with a heavy but silent breath.

"Can you reliably identify the Chesapeake Ripper's work on sight alone?" Hannibal inquired from beside Will, still resting comfortably.

"Yes," Will said after a moment's pause. "I think so, anyway."

"What distinguishes him from others?" Hannibal questioned further.

The dark-haired man got out of bed and stretched his shoulders back as he formulated a response.

"Other than missing organs?" Will snarkily asked. "Artistry, intention, disdain. It's a feeling, not a checklist."

Hannibal didn't produce further questions. He started to sit up and looked like he was planning on grudgingly getting out of bed when Will caught his gaze.

"Go back to sleep. Only one of us was summoned by Jack Crawford," Will firmly directed. As he walked toward the bathroom to change and wash his face with the coldest water he could run, he called over his shoulder, "Lock up when you leave. Let the dogs out before, if you have time."

Leaving his home with the warm body still wrapped in his sheets was proving embarrassingly difficult, but somehow, Will found comfort in the idea that he was leaving his house and dogs occupied. It felt less like abandonment and more like partnership. The icy water, thankfully, took the pinkness out of his cheeks as he floated along these idle streams of thought.

When Will slipped out of the house, he peeked into the living room turned bedroom. Winston had taken advantage of the warmth and Will's absence, and he was now curled in his space. The dog tolerated Hannibal, and Will sensed the feeling was mutual.

The field was an hour away, and Will didn't arrive until right after 6:00 AM. The scene was marked clearly by the presence of police vehicles both at the turn-off to the country road

nearest the field and the actual scene itself. Will had to trek through tall, icy weeds to get to the far side where Freddie Lounds was arranged.

Will's eyes fixed on Freddie, disregarding Jack's frowning glare and the lab team milling around collecting samples. She was elevated on a wooden platform, an old tree stand the property's owner must've used long ago; against the gray of winter, her red hair flamed around her white face. Her eyes were closed, but her mouth was open-- too open-- and a waterfall of yellow and white flowers twined on vibrant greenery spilled out over her chest and down to her hips. There, the waterfall met a bed of similar flowers which surrounded her and covered the ancient wood of the deer stand. Her hands were laid palms up at her sides; she looked like a goddess of spring, frozen in the winter snow but waiting to awaken and renew the land. In death, Freddie Lounds possessed a serenity she never embodied in life.

At first, Will didn't notice there were no legs underneath the flowers. When he did recognize the amputations, the acknowledgement came only as he observed how the scene made Freddie appear to be rising from the earth, paused mid-ascension. The legs would've gotten in the way of the effect, Will surmised.

He made himself move closer and greet the team waiting for him.

"Ripper or Gideon?" Jack asked bluntly.

"If there's a third option, I'm retiring," Price blurted, looking even less rested than Will.

Will watched the warm air cloud in front of his face as he said, "It's the Ripper."
"And you're sure?" Jack questioned, tilting his head and widening his eyes. The request for affirmation was more for show than necessity; Jack already knew it was the Ripper.

Will nodded, "Yes. The entire scene is his thumbprint."

"I wish he'd leave the kind of print we can run against our database," Zeller mumbled from Jimmy's side. "That's a lot of flower petals to dust."

"And I have allergies," Jimmy complained to Zeller, voice nasally in the cold.

"Beverly, got anything?" Jack turned toward the woman bundled in a black coat, ignoring her teammates.

She was all business as she reported her findings so far: "Checked for footprints around the stand, but there's nothing. Ripper must've dropped the body before the snow yesterday. The cold will make determining when she died almost impossible, but the condition of the flowers suggests this was all recently arranged."

Zeller added, "Looks like her jaw was broken to make room for the flowers-- no way to tell if it was pre- or post-mortem until we have her on the table. Same for cause of death."

Jack bristled at the lack of information, mouth tensing and breath coming harder out of his nose and forming swirls of wispy fog.

"Will?" Jack summoned without turning his head.

The conversation the team was having differed so greatly from Will's own internal discussion that he felt like they were in different worlds. They saw the violence; he saw the beauty. They saw death; he saw refinement. Freddie Lounds' insolent voice had been silenced, and her ambition would never again infest someone else's home or compromise a crime scene. Will thought he understood the Ripper's purpose without retreating into his mind-- it was all but gift wrapped for whomever chose to pluck the ribbon.

"She offended him. Deeply. It's why the scene is so--" *Ethereal. Perfect* "--ornate. She's been missing since Christmas; amputation was before death, like Miriam Lass. He didn't hurry."

Zeller scoffed and challenged, "Lounds was the Tattle Crime reporter. She could've figured out who he was, found him."

Will put his glasses in his pocket to see Freddie with unimpeded vision.

"No," he refuted simply. Will walked to the stand, as close as he could get, and looked up at the scene. He waited a long moment to continue, letting Zeller get a touch red in the face at the perceived slight. "Freddie Lounds was careless with other people's lives, not her own. His message doesn't fit your theory-- if she'd found him, he would've told us. All this says is that he found her reporting rude. He *fixed* Freddie."

"Good guess," Jimmy said to Zeller in a facetiously sympathetic tone, only receiving a huffing sound in response. He turned back to Will, "Know anything about flowers?"

"Can't say I do," Will answered, shaking his head once. He scanned the pristine tableau again, then stated, "They're flawless."

"He preserved them," Beverly clarified, catching Will's suggestion before the others and becoming intrigued by it.

"What kind of artistic statement is that?" Jack asked in a bitter voice. His loathing for the killer was unmistakable.

Beverly replied, racing ahead of the others, "It's not. Maybe it makes the flowers look nice, but he did it so we couldn't tell when he killed her. Everything in the scene is frozen in time."

"Get it all back to the lab and *unfreeze* it," Jack bit, then turned around and crunched away in the snow, headed toward the line of police vehicles.

Will imagined Jack saw Miriam in every victim now, which meant he saw his failure in each one, as well.

"We've got daisies to pick," Price said, clapping a hand on Zeller's shoulder and turning him around toward the van that held their field supplies.

"Even I know those aren't daisies," Zeller grumbled back.

Beverly watched them walk away then took a few steps toward Will, who was still staring up at the scene. It was difficult to leave knowing it would be disassembled, laid bare on a stainless steel table, then categorized into evidence containers.

“I think you’re released,” she said pleasantly.

“Generous of him to let me go as soon as the sun rises. I don’t think Freddie Lounds was in any danger of walking away,” Will complained.

“You’re extra prickly this morning, Graham,” Beverly observed. Then, she glanced at the other two members of her team, who were well out of earshot, and asked in a quiet, suggestive tone, “Someone keeping the bed warm for you?”

A noise that he wanted to be an objection rose in his throat, then fell off. He didn’t respond.

Beverly turned her back to the two agents fumbling through the gear so that she could let surprise spread across her face without them seeing. She accused, “You do! *I was joking!*”

Will brought his glasses back out and placed them on the bridge of his nose. They fogged a little, blurring his vision until they warmed.

“Will, you’re killing me. You know that, right?” she went on, a genuinely friendly smile across her lips.

He sighed, looked skyward, then replied, “It’s complicated.” He imagined his teenage self doing and saying the same as his father interrogated him about whether or not he had a crush on the girl who lived three houses down.

Beverly waved her hand to dismiss his concerns and said, “I won’t pry. I’m not my mother.” She watched his posture relax.

“Looks like you’re needed,” Will commented, tilting his head toward the van where Brian and Jimmy had pulled out three separate plastic bins and were rifling for something, the two clearly sniping at each other’s suggestions.

“Tell the man hi for me,” she called as she left.

He had no intention of doing so, and she knew it.

When Will arrived home, he was greeted by the sight of his dogs running across the snow and Hannibal standing on the porch, clad in Will’s sleeping clothes and his fine, black coat. Only he could make such a patently ridiculous get-up look dignified. Will took a few seconds before he got out of the car, pretending he was adjusting the vents; in truth, the scene inspired such tremendous, fluttering warmth in his stomach that he didn’t trust himself to not say something he’d later regret.

When he did finally exit, the dogs sprinted toward him, and he poured his affection out on them instead. Hannibal walked toward the group but waited until the dogs ran back to the porch to say anything.

“They’ve eaten. Don’t let them tell you otherwise,” he warned Will.

Will glanced at the man’s attire again, then understood he couldn’t exactly change back into his clothing from the previous evening. Hannibal cruising down the highway in his Bentley

while clad in old pajamas struck Will as terribly funny, but he suppressed his humor.

“How was Ms. Lounds?” Hannibal inquired, still not drumming up any remorse.

The possible responses swirled in Will’s consciousness, too many of them for him to choose. A voice reverberating from the catacombs of his mind bid him to remember that he did not need to lie now, not to this person in this place.

He finally settled on a single adjective: “Better.”

Hannibal’s mouth opened and closed just a hint, the mimic of a whisper. His eyes were guarded but bright, sharp.

“How so?”

A trail of steam slowly wound from Will’s mouth into the crisp morning air.

“He covered her in flowers-- they were pouring out of her mouth like...words.” Will didn’t think about what he was saying, letting it run freely for the moment while he fixed his eyes on the tree-lined horizon. “The Ripper made her curse into a blessing. Made her more than she was in life. God, I hated Freddie Lounds, but today, she was...exquisite.”

He glanced back at Hannibal. The fair-haired man stared at Will, intense and ravenous. It was a look Will had only seen some version of during their more heated moments, but it wasn’t exactly lust on Hannibal’s face now. He looked like he understood Will’s words-- could have conjured them himself out of the fogged air-- and wanted to crush Will into him until their bones were as conjoined as their thoughts.

Will swallowed hard, blinked a few times, and tried to reset this mental image. He was making careless assumptions because he had allowed his thoughts to go rabid and dark in his current frame of mind.

The morning sun caught the reddish flecks in Hannibal’s brown eyes and cast him in gold. When he spoke, his voice was soft, breathy: “Do you mourn Freddie Lounds? If you had the power, would you undo her death, her transformation?”

Will did not wait to respond.

“No.”

The word hung between them. Hannibal didn’t push further, and Will didn’t offer more. There was no more to say. Will knew Hannibal had glimpsed the slices of his darkness-- from their first case together with Garrett Jacob Hobbs to killing Tobias Budge in the man’s office. Their conversations often circled unsavory topics in ways Will could process, and he had never sensed any inkling of scorn. It was a not insignificant portion of Hannibal’s allure: There was never a time when Will worried his honesty would be rewarded with contempt.

“Good,” Hannibal eventually said in a voice brimming with tightly reined emotion. He looked toward his vehicle, then back at Will and added in a much lighter, more polished tone, “Thank you for hosting me.”

Will shifted uncomfortably on his feet, awkwardness over their current situation circling as the intensity of his feelings from the crime scene ebbed.

He put a hand in his hair, a nervous gesture, and responded, “It’s not an estate, but you seem to have survived the night.”

A small frown pulled at Hannibal’s brow, yet he recovered so swiftly Will thought he might have mistaken the expression.

“I’m rather fond of your home.”

As had become their way, Will heard the words the other man didn’t say. He caught Hannibal’s gratitude at having been allowed into the sanctuary; he understood Hannibal’s enjoyment sprang from his affection for Will and all things that were part of Will’s self-made world. It wasn’t the kind of sentiment one might expect from Dr. Lecter, the immaculate and chic host of pretentious soirees. It was precisely the sentiment Will expected from Hannibal Lecter, his friend.

Hannibal started to walk past Will to his car, presumably having already packed it with his belongings from inside the house. When he opened his car door, though, he stopped. Will did not often see Hannibal hesitate-- it mostly emerged when the other man was uncertain if he had committed a misstep in their evolving physical relationship-- but he was unmoving and lost in thought as he stood by his vehicle.

“Will,” Hannibal began, voice soothing and even. It was a therapist’s voice; Will tensed instinctively. “How do you feel about theatre?”

Yet another question Will Graham had never been asked before.

“I have no feelings,” Will responded, still nervous.

“If you’re not opposed, would you like to join me Saturday evening? I think you’d find it more engaging than the symphony,” Hannibal suggested, having picked up how distracted and unimpressed Will was by both the experience and his fellow attendees.

Will wanted to say no. It would be more of the same, and he had less than zero desire to drag out his undertakers’ suit again. He was certain his face already unmistakably communicated his utter lack of approval.

“Okay, I guess.”

Hannibal didn’t smile, but his eyes lifted at the corners and fine ghosts of crow’s feet appeared. Will resigned himself, figuring it was payback for not shooing Winston off the bed this morning. He watched Hannibal get in the car and close the door but turned before the tires moved on the gravel. A sea of furry bodies was waiting for him on the porch, huddling together.

Will let them in and absorbed the silence of the home. It felt deserted. He wandered around, reacclimating to the space without another body in it. He noticed the bed was made-- hospital

corners-- and every surface in the kitchen had been wiped clean. Seeing small reminders of the other man's existence, such as the neatly collected towels from his shower and the droplets of water still in the kitchen sink from his cleaning, was bittersweet. Will loved the easiness of his existence, the solace and independence it provided, but he had lately imagined another person rattling around sometimes. It could be nice to watch the dogs run the yard with someone, to have lazy weekend breakfasts in the cozy kitchen, to fall asleep to the white noise of another's breathing. Catching himself and his descent into sappiness, Will went about the task of starting his day in earnest, classes at Quantico still scheduled for that afternoon.

When Will got to his classroom that afternoon, a note was left on his desk in Jack's oversized scrawl:
Lab, 6:00 PM. --Jack

A buzz of anticipation lit Will's nerves, and he lectured with that same anxious energy. Of course, the students had not yet learned what to make of Professor Graham, so they couldn't distinguish if this was normal-- on the Will Graham scale-- or if they should be worried about a surprise quiz or impromptu shaming for their lack of studying. They mostly seemed glad to leave and keen not to meet his eyes. It was, frankly, the kind of class Will preferred.

In the time between class and the lab meeting, he browsed through old notes on the Ripper case. Will could almost recite them by memory now, but he needed to assure himself he was as close to understanding the unknown man as possible before viewing the most recent crime scene evidence again. A quarter until six, Will's excitement got the best of him, and he went ahead to the lab to meet the team.

The rest of the group must have been on a similar wavelength, as he was the last to arrive. Jack stood with his arms crossed and his feet planted wide, a scowl pinching his features. He looked ready for disappointment. He remained silent when Will entered-- in fact, nobody spoke for a few moments until Beverly decided not to wait for Jack's signal any longer and launched into their findings.

"Legs were removed before death...and not at the same time. The point of amputation on the left leg was healing, but the right leg looks like it was incised and stitched nearer to death. The joint and musculature at the jaw showed no inflammation, so the injury was sustained post-mortem." Beverly was working herself up, getting more enthused as her spiel went on. "But get this-- the jaw wasn't broken, just stretched. We believe he put something between her teeth and froze her like that."

"Think of a pig with an apple in its mouth," Jimmy broke in, miming the image.

"It gets worse: He took her tongue," Beverly continued, eyebrows raising.

Zeller stood up straight from his position leaning against one of the rows of drawers and looked mournfully at the body on the table in the center of the room. He supplied the final detail: "Cause of death? She asphyxiated on her own blood."

Jack's crossed arms squeezed impossibly tighter, and Will could see his neck straining with his barely controlled outrage. There was nowhere for it to go.

“What about the flowers?” Will questioned.

Zeller looked at him like he’d asked if anyone wanted ice cream in the middle of a eulogy. Beverly didn’t disappoint him, though, as her exuberance was not yet spent.

“Two kinds. The white is camellia--”

“The state flower of Alabama,” Price threw out.

“--and the yellow is primrose. Want to take a shot at the symbolism?”

Will scanned the room uneasily, then flatly remarked, “Defiance of authorities?”

Beverly shook her head.

“Not even close. It’s love.”

Jack’s surprise at the revelation drew him back to the conversation and out of his maddening thoughts.

“Love? The Ripper *loved* Freddie Lounds?” he asked, voice rough and too loud.

Chastised by Jack’s tone, Beverly explained, “White camellias represent adoration, and yellow primrose is given as a message that you can’t live without the recipient. He coated them with wax to prevent decay.”

“An unrequited crush,” Zeller suggested.

Will was vaguely aware that Jack was looking at him for confirmation or denial, but the world was going black and lopsided, his blood in his ears. A thought-- a crazy, unreasonable, horrible thought-- had carved itself into the tablet of his mind, and he could not scratch it clean. The Chesapeake Ripper was in love. The Chesapeake Ripper, who had a sense of artistry and irony, was in love. The Chesapeake Ripper, who had surgical skills keen enough to keep two people alive after amputations in spite of lacking medical facility access, was in love. The Chesapeake Ripper, who Will finally understood with the murder of Freddie Lounds, was in love.

And that insane, unspeakable, earth-shattering thought still wouldn’t leave Will’s mind no matter how hard Jack stared at him or how condescending Zeller looked as he stood coolly and met everyone’s gaze with ease. Will put the meat of his palms against his eyes as he had often done when he had headaches. It bought him a second of breath.

Eyes still covered and ears ringing, Will provided the team with the correct interpretation: “The Chesapeake Ripper is in love, but it isn’t with Freddie Lounds. She was the messenger.”

When Will lowered his hands and opened his eyes, mentally counting his breaths to ensure he didn’t entirely stop the flow of oxygen, he saw that Jack had put his hands on his hips and was staring a hole into the ground.

“We’re the Chesapeake Ripper’s dating service now?” he fumed.

“More like mail carriers,” Beverly commented.

While the others chattered about this revelation, Will talked himself off the ledge he was hop-scotching along. He knew it was probably unjustified paranoia, his panicked brain’s way of distancing himself from someone he felt close to. Hannibal was kind to him. He was gracious. He was polite. He was thoughtful in unseen ways. He knew Will; he saw him.

What’s more, Will knew him.

But that was the problem: Will *knew* him, and he knew none of the traits that made Hannibal the man he was were antithetical to murder. If Hannibal wanted Will to disassemble the final, stubborn wall between them so that Will could see him and know him for who he was, this was a hell of a way to do it.

Will tuned the rest of the conversation out, spending every last ounce of energy and focus on staying alive one second at a time. He didn’t risk speaking, too protective of the secret he now feared he was harboring. He only knew the meeting had ended because one second Jack was at his side, but the next, he was gone.

In his car, Will reasoned with himself again. There was a certain suspension of disbelief in claiming *anyone* was the Ripper; there wasn’t enough information to build an indisputable profile. He couldn’t discount the possibility of his own concerns about relationships making him prone to both having Hannibal at the forefront of his thoughts and suspecting him of misdeeds in a hail Mary attempt at defending himself from hurt. Making these kinds of assumptions was dangerous, whether Hannibal was the Ripper or not.

He could keep his eyes open without pointing any fingers. He would have to do this. And if he saw something to confirm that Hannibal was the Ripper, he would decide then what to do. Will knew it shouldn’t be a question; the objectively right course of action would be to inform Jack and step away from the entirety of the situation before he could be further harmed. But right and wrong were relative as much as normalcy was anymore, and the idea of Hannibal subject to Jack’s heaving, roaring justice was unconscionable.

He hoped he was wrong. He prayed to whatever god would still listen to his pleas that he was wrong.

When he arrived home, there was a box on the front porch with a letter attached. Will could tell from the thick paper and flowing script it was from Hannibal. He sat down on the steps with the box between his legs and opened it, numb to the world. He was watching himself from a detached distance.

The contents of the box amounted to a fussy version of a care package-- a Hannibal version, he supposed. There were small jars of dehydrated vegetable chips and canned fruits as well as vacuum-sealed jerky packs and a few other portioned, homemade snacks.

The brief note read:
Will,

I cannot in good conscience condone cereal for dinner. Please accept these alternatives. I hope you do not take offense-- I think only of your health.

H.L.

Will looked at the box, looked at the letter, and thought of cascading white and yellow flowers. On his porch stairs, he put his head in his hands and laughed until he cried, then cried until he laughed.

He did not go inside for a long time.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> I LOVED reading all of your comments on the last chapter! It was a doozy, and it's been so much fun hearing what you all think. Thank you all, as always, for reading and letting me know your thoughts! ❤️❤️

Professor Graham's students developed a trepidation that bordered on unhealthy the week Freddie Lounds' body was discovered. His reputation had preceded him, of course, but he had so far this term only shown a veiled fierceness that could almost have been confused as enthusiasm for his work. That week, however, Will Graham was fearsome.

He walked the halls with his shoulders back and spine drawn up to his full height. He was at least an inch-- maybe two-- taller when he stood straight. His brow was furrowed in a near-constant frown, and his mouth remained set tightly. When he spoke, it was fast and deliberate, words like "kill" and "disfigure" punctuated by a tone that fell just short of a growl. His students kept their eyes on their notes and the slideshow, avoiding the professor as he prowled around the classroom. They weren't sure what he was looking for, but they knew they didn't want to be the prey that compelled him to pounce. They entered and exited in a hurry, the room quiet enough to hear a pin drop. They didn't speak of him anywhere near the door of the classroom, certain he would hear or somehow sense their unkind words. He became something monstrous in their eyes those few days.

Will Graham's experience of the week, however, differed dramatically from his students' perception of it.

He woke up each morning and began another day of binding the warring emotions within his mind, chest, and stomach. His entire body existed in a tense state of fiery reverberation, nerves seeming to vibrate within his skin from the moment he woke until he finally fell asleep each night. He showered, washing himself with water that ran either too hot or too cold, neither helping him feel human again and neither washing away his new knowledge. He tried to eat toast but gagged on it, the texture making him ill in the face of his absolute lack of hunger. In the mornings, he avoided looking at the still-packed box on his kitchen table-- the box left on his front porch-- and it became a ghost fixed in the corner of his vision. He downed black coffee, the acidity further ruining his empty stomach, and he dressed in clothing he'd worn countless times before, no mental space devoted to its selection. He drove without thought, seemingly transported to his destination.

Will lectured on topics he knew by heart, and he allowed himself to release his wrath as he discussed the murderers and their crimes. He let himself loathe them, crave their death even if they'd already perished with a needle in their arm. They disgusted him, sickened him, drove him to fury in a way he had never felt prior; he stalked the classroom in circles as rage

dripped from his pores and he gripped the slideshow clicker with white knuckles. He imagined what he would do to them, what heinous end he would inflict and how it would feel under his hands.

He wasn't so lacking in self-awareness that he couldn't understand why he had a renewed ire for the killers he studied. Will could hate them, long for their deaths-- to be the brutal yet just executioner. He had not yet found this capacity when it came to Hannibal.

On the drive to Wolf Trap each evening, he was exhausted from policing his thoughts as much as from permitting himself the catharsis of repeatedly slaughtering the killers he presented to his students for dissection. By the time he was home, he would sit in his car for as long as thirty minutes, unable to summon the energy to move. He'd lean his head back against the padded rest and close his eyes.

The evenings stretched endlessly. The snow had melted into a slushy, muddy film that had to be cleaned from his dogs' paws after each venture outside. He was no hungrier than he had been in the morning, so he'd force down crackers and water. He'd poke around the care box, then, entering the portion of the day where doubt settled into the cracks of his mind. He could not reconcile the man who sent him a care package, sat by his bedside in the hospital, made him dinner when he was ill, and touched him so cautiously with the man who left Freddie Lounds on a deer stand in a deserted field.

But no, that wasn't quite accurate, was it?

The problem was that he *could* reconcile these ideas-- he understood too well the ability of the human mind to hold both unsavory desires and burning warmth-- but he did not want to imagine this duality in a person he had come to care for so very much. He could know in the pit of his stomach and the innermost chambers of his mind that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper and that he had left a vibrant, unmistakable message for someone (not *someone*-- Will knew it was for him); the horror came when he extended this thinking to himself and what it meant for his own life. It was a horrendously selfish train of thought, but this was what drove Will to exist as he did: not eating, frightening his students, forcing himself into numbness until the levee broke each night.

Will could believe Hannibal was the Ripper; he could not believe Hannibal was the Ripper and possessed the ability to love, not as Will understood love or wanted it. Will knew he himself may be broken in countless ways-- most of them with clinical names-- but he also had no doubt he was at least capable of love. His dogs proved that; his home proved that. When the whiskey came out, hitting hard on an empty stomach, he admitted maybe even Hannibal's existence in his life proved that-- or had the potential of proving it until that all went to Hell in a handbasket. But the ugliness of the world meant one could love something unlovable and incapable of reciprocating that love-- something that would rip his throat out at a misstep. Loving someone like Hannibal-- if Hannibal was truly the Ripper-- would be closer to a zookeeper loving a tiger than a relationship.

The last throes of the night before Will collapsed into bed were spent wavering between legitimate doubt that he was correct in his assertion that Hannibal was the Ripper and latent guilt that he was wandering further and further away from being able to turn the man over to Jack Crawford if his theory proved true.

He fell asleep each night questioning who Will Graham was.

Saturday stretched into eternity. Will checked the clock every few minutes, disheartened by how slowly time moved. He had worked himself into such a muddled state of anxiety that he longed for the clarity he hoped the evening would provide more than he worried about the dangers it may hold. It crossed his mind briefly that Hannibal could try to kill him if he was the Ripper and sensed something alarming in Will's demeanor; by Saturday, though, the thought didn't worry Will. If Hannibal tried to kill him, either he would be successful or Will would be; both scenarios resulted in the end of this maddening existence between realities.

Will spent time with his dogs, walking them around the property and to the melting stream, but failed to absorb any of their warmth or light. The wind had a bite though the ground was no longer covered in a blanket of white, and the air chilled his body to the bone. He fiddled around the garage, pacing more than working. He reorganized the shelves downstairs, still not moving the box, and idly considered what he might do with the upstairs. Having gone there to shower-- *because he and Hannibal had been on his bed, bringing each other over the brink*, he recalled with a flush-- he was forced to confront how utterly he'd discarded an entire floor of his home. Will's body was too tightly wound with the plethora of emotions he felt regarding the more pressing situation in his life to experience the embarrassment he'd had over the abandoned upstairs, but this was something utterly mundane to do to keep his mind occupied.

Hannibal messaged him earlier in the week and suggested a 6:00 PM arrival. The play began at 8:00. Will didn't respond, but at 4:30 on Saturday, he showered and dressed for the show. He drove to Baltimore with a clouded mind; he kept his thoughts locked tightly away in one of his expertly-crafted forts, but half ideas still swirled around in his mind. He felt dazed, probably from adrenaline though it was almost certainly exacerbated by his poor physical state. He was tired and hadn't eaten properly in days; a dull headache thrummed behind his eyes. He was too weary to panic as he should.

Even when he rang the doorbell, Will didn't feel fear. Resignation, perhaps, but not fear.

The door opened and Hannibal, the man Will remembered, appeared. Will gave himself time to assess the figure in the doorway, not feeling self-conscious that he stood in silence for far too long. Hannibal wore dark suit pants with an apron tied around his waist, the linen just a shade darker than his white dress shirt. He was the only person Will knew who cooked in white dress clothing, yet there was never a stray stain or spot. His jaw and brow were relaxed, and his mouth lifted when he saw Will on his doorstep. His dark eyes were sharp and watchful, even as the pupils dilated. One arm was raised and bent, holding the door open with a hand draped casually by his face. The crook of the arm was tight, though-- concealed tension. The other hand hung by his side, the fingers imitating looseness. There was no knife dangling from his fingertips, which heartened Will a tad. The whole effect was one of friendly easiness; it wasn't entirely a lie, but it wasn't the truth either. This didn't make him the Ripper, but it hinted at subterfuge. Tellingly, Hannibal did not interrupt Will's slow scan of his form despite the dark-haired man's expression being closer to scrutiny than affection. When Will finally met Hannibal's eyes for more than a second's observation, Hannibal greeted him properly.

“Hello, Will,” he said in an unguarded tone.

Will didn’t respond, just let his head cock slightly to the side as he added the tone of voice as another layer to the scene. Hannibal let him in without waiting for a return greeting.

The unchanged rightness of Hannibal’s home added further confusion. Nothing in the home read as dishonest-- it was all entirely Hannibal, from polished floor to antlered chandelier. More than that, it still felt familiar, safe. No alarms sounded in Will’s mind when he took a few steps into the house and heard the door close behind him. Hannibal came to stand by his side, body positioned toward him. His pupils were further blackened, a physiological suggestion of fondness more than an effect of the light. These were the signals Will read best: involuntary reactions to stimuli. Flushed cheeks, tightened muscles, strained jaws, reddened ears, set shoulders...the list of physical manifestations to emotional and situational catalysts was internalized more so for Will than for others, an intrinsic part of his processing. The contradiction in Hannibal’s dark eyes and his affected looseness disarmed Will.

There were only two options: Hannibal was the Ripper or he was not. If he was, Will needed to determine it definitively and decide what he wanted to do with this information, hopefully not dying in the process. If he was not, Will imagined it must be fairly disconcerting for his new-- *Boyfriend? God, what a loaded term and so far from appropriate*-- significant other to be staring him down in his foyer. Both situations called for Will to at least pretend normalcy. Admittedly, he didn’t feel capable of doing much else at the moment.

“It’s been a long week,” Will offered vaguely, still looking into the deep brown eyes fixed on him.

“You look unwell,” Hannibal responded, and Will gave a wry laugh in spite of himself. He could only imagine how *unwell* he looked after the last few days.

“Is your next question going to be a veiled criticism of my eating habits?” Will asked, sarcastic but not acidic.

Hannibal flashed a brief smile, a show of the tips of his teeth, and answered, “Have I grown predictable already?”

Will wanted to vehemently assure him he was not, in any way, predictable, but it seemed a dangerous thread of conversation. He remained silent, keeping his eyebrows raised expectantly.

“If you tell me my concerns are unfounded, I will believe you,” Hannibal vowed. Then, thoughtfully, seriously, he added, “Equality is predicated on the presence of the truth.”

And you are my equal. The unsaid words were the most important ones to Hannibal.

Will also heard the offer in the statement: If he asked any question directly, Hannibal would not lie.

It was a roundabout approach to Hannibal’s proclaimed belief in equality, but Will knew Hannibal well enough to realize most of his approaches were in the form of a figure eight

instead of a straight line. The most urgent questions-- *Are you the Chesapeake Ripper? Will you kill me?* Are you in love with me?-- clawed at one another in Will's mind, vying to escape first. Yet, his tired body clamped his jaw tightly shut and pressed his tongue hard against the roof of his mouth.

Hannibal's statement held a third meaning his body heard before his mind did: If Will didn't want to know, he simply need not ask. They both knew Will would never be able to live with uncertainty hanging over his neck like a guillotine, but if tonight wasn't the night for revelation, Hannibal wouldn't force it to be. Will felt eroded and transparent, a piece of beach glass tossed ashore.

He looked forward down the hall and replied as lightly as he could, "I haven't been hungry."

In his peripheral vision, Will saw Hannibal's head tip to look downward for a moment.

"Could I persuade you otherwise?" the man asked, recovering quickly. He led the way to the kitchen without waiting.

The smell of food-- real food-- produced the desired response in Will's stomach, a sickening hunger twisting within him. He was unhappy to find the setting comfortable, welcoming as ever. When Hannibal handed him a knife and Will accepted it, there was no hesitation in either man's action. All that was left was chopping basil and thyme to be added in the last moments of cooking, preserving the herbs' freshness. He sensed Hannibal could have done this himself, but he also knew Hannibal seemed to enjoy having Will's hand in the meal.

Settling in the comfortable routine, Will thought sardonically, *A sentimental serial killer. That's who I attract.* He tamped down the crazed cackle forming behind his ribs. Mental and physical distress were a formidable duo for a man whose humor already leaned rather dark.

When they sat down to eat, the part of Will's mind that was well-honed in producing a distillation of guilt and shame tried to let the bitter solution slip into his stomach as it had each day since the discovery of Freddie Lounds, but the bestial hunger that bloomed within him allowed no more than a moment's interference. He didn't speak as he ate, though he noticed Hannibal casting a few glances that Will felt, not saw, were uneasier than before. Will hoped the man felt at least one sting of remorse. If he's the Ripper, a stubborn, desperate part of him added to the thought.

After inhaling half of his plate, queasiness at the sudden influx of food slowed him to a more polite pace. Opportunistic as ever, Hannibal didn't miss the chance to start a new discussion.

"I hope tonight's play exceeds your expectations," he commented, overly courteous tone indicating he knew exactly how high those expectations were.

"It's not the show that concerns me. It's the audience," Will plainly replied, looking up at Hannibal through the glasses that had slipped a bit down the bridge of his nose. He didn't hide his judgment.

"You tolerate my presence," Hannibal gladly pointed out.

Will gave him a scowl, then bit back in a scathing tone, “But you’re exceptional.”

Will had no reason to antagonize Hannibal, other than the general notion that if he was to be killed by the Ripper, he ought to at least deserve it a little bit.

Hannibal’s neutral set of his brow and tiny quirk of his lips was as infuriating now as it always was when he stared back in a way that clearly communicated how he rather enjoyed being the target of Will’s enmity.

“Then disregard the audience,” Hannibal stated, making it sound very simple.

“Are you advising rudeness, Doctor?” Will asked with faux sincerity.

Hannibal looked Will’s face up and down with the same veiled affection that had so often crept into his expression as the days, weeks, and months had passed.

“Never. There exists a space between rudeness and charm. I believe you visit often,” Hannibal pleasantly said in a rare moment of unmistakable teasing, which was followed by him taking a bite.

Will sighed, dissatisfied by the guidance. Even now with his mind buzzing with conscious and subconscious activity, he wasn’t delighted by the idea of ruining something for the other man. He resumed the meal, thinking through the immediate, much easier problem of how to navigate the theatre crowd. If he could only continue thinking solely of this problem, he could survive the evening.

The pair finished, cleared the table, and washed dishes together, the same pattern they always followed now. The thought materializing from nowhere in particular, Will wondered if this was the last time they would do this together, and a flood of unexpected sadness shocked his system. He stood still, the water running but his hands not moving, for a few seconds as he braced himself against the tidal wave. His throat felt hot, and an aching started behind his sternum. Nausea rocked his stomach; pressure built behind his cheekbones and at the back of his throat. He hadn’t permitted himself to realize all that he would mourn if he was right. *When* he confirmed he was right.

Hannibal registered his pause but didn’t push him to speak.

They finished the dishes, Will working with a laserlike focus. When they were done, Will found it difficult to move. He talked himself through turning around, making the muscles in his legs flex and his knees bend. Hannibal leaned against the countertop next to him, now not hiding his burning focus.

“Will--”

It was not possible for Will to speak. He knew this as certainly as he knew he would one day soon dream of cooking meals shoulder-to-shoulder with Hannibal and awaken drenched in sweat.

Will cut him off with a hand wrapping around the back of his neck, fingers in silky hair. Will looked at his mouth, not his eyes, and winced as he brought their lips together. He tasted salt in his own mouth, and he wondered briefly if Hannibal would taste it as well and somehow intuit Will's sorrow with his impossibly refined palate. It was a romantic notion more than a realistic one.

The kiss was short and broken first by the fair-haired man, who looked at Will with a flat-lined mouth and brow but eyes that darted too quickly across his visage. Will felt deep within his core that he was the only person in the world who would read the look as the consuming worry it was. Will brought a hand to Hannibal's angular, strong jaw and felt the tension there. He held it for a moment, then said, "We should go."

If Hannibal was the Ripper, he had to know beyond doubt that Will saw him, at last.

And he had to know with equal certainty that everything after could be nothing more than a long goodbye.

"Sickness is a perfectly valid reason to escape an undesirable event," Hannibal responded, voice even as his eyes left Will's face and slowly moved across the room.

Will nodded his agreement, discreetly eyeing Hannibal's hands for weapons. He didn't think Hannibal was going to attempt to murder him now, to obliterate his knowledge, but it was unwise to lower his guard. He didn't move, unsure of how to proceed now.

Still without looking at Will, Hannibal remarked in a slow, careful voice, "If you tried to leave, I wouldn't attempt to stop you."

Will looked at the man's profile, the statement as close to a confession as Will presumed he would receive without asking the question Hannibal seemed to *want* him to ask. He didn't want to empathize with Hannibal, but the man's absent gazing across the room and rigid posture as he leaned against the counter couldn't be ignored. Hannibal wanted to be known by Will, believed that the very nature of love was being seen; what did it mean if he showed himself, fully, to someone and they looked away? It was too painful to imagine. Will knew the feeling-- had experienced it himself. To be made horrible-- or, worse, invisible-- in the eyes of one you held in high regard.

The recognition of this pain was accompanied by renewed ire. The Chesapeake Ripper had no right to expect acceptance, particularly not from an FBI academy professor and special agent. He murdered people for lesser crimes than he committed, and he did so gleefully, artistically. He wore a veil of humanity to accommodate his professional persona and protect his leisurely lifestyle. He lied to Will, if not blatantly sure as hell by omission. He let Will become involved with him-- encouraged it-- and then left a burning confession in a field for Will to find. Mercy was not what he deserved.

Will let the rush of righteous indignation motivate him to move. He stood straight, took a breath, and left the kitchen, headed for the front door. Hannibal followed behind him by a few paces, out of reach. In the entryway, Hannibal maintained a greater distance than usual. Will had not imagined *respectful* being part of the Ripper's profile, but he figured the entire sketch needed reworking now anyway. There was a finality in the air around them, a note of

conclusion echoing through the airwaves. Will identified himself as the instrument producing the note, but Hannibal still heard it. Even through his red haze of fury, Will felt the anguish of his heart unspooling into his stomach. Part of him found solace still in this home and in the man's presence in spite of the fact the reason he needed that solace in the first place was because of Hannibal's actions.

There were not words or time enough for Will to convey what he felt. He suspected Hannibal knew already. He took a single step closer and ran his fingers through the loose fringe of Hannibal's hair, a mirror of what Hannibal had done to Will numerous times before.

Will set his face in stone as he trailed his fingertips from the crown of Hannibal's head, across his cheekbone, over his jaw, along his neck, and down to his wrist. Just as Will needed a final memory of a kiss-- one that still sent the tiniest sparks of electricity through his body in spite of the crushing weight of his other emotions-- he needed to remember this person as he was.

When Hannibal was arrested and interrogated, Will would turn away from the mirrored glass and remember golden, graying hair.

When the press got hold of the story and wrote sordid, detailed descriptions of his crimes and what evidence was found in his home-- this home-- Will would remember the shapely outline of his cheekbones.

When Hannibal was given a psychological assessment to determine his fitness to stand trial, Will would remember how wonderfully soft the skin of his neck was.

When Hannibal was locked in a cage away from all of the beauty of the world, Will would remember the strong, lean body that looked most at home hovering over a busy stovetop.

And when Hannibal was killed, either by lethal injection or by a prison inmate who wanted to be known as the man who got the best of the Chesapeake Ripper, Will would remember the amber eyes that turned black with the unknowable emotion Hannibal labeled as love when he looked at Will's face.

He committed these things to memory, aware that it would be all he had.

"Goodbye, Hannibal," Will said with a conviction he didn't entirely feel.

Hannibal continued looking at him-- possibly making a similar engraving of this moment, their last moment-- without answering.

Will didn't allow himself the luxury of pausing as he opened the door and left. He did not look back, although he knew Hannibal would be there. He did not falter. As far as Hannibal Lecter would know, Will Graham disappeared into the night, consumed by the dark.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

> You all are just the funniest and best. I get suck a kick out of the things you all say-- both the sweet and the hilarious. This is a not-quite-transitional chapter; a breather for poor Will. Thank you for reading and for making me laugh/smile each time I check my inbox!

Will didn't go directly home. Once he was out of the city, he pulled over on the side of the highway and got out of his car, energy from his anger-- at himself as much as Hannibal-- making the cabin of his vehicle seem too small to contain him and his new perspective of the world. Momentum alone brought him here, and his thoughts had separated from his racing physical form somewhere between Hannibal's kitchen and where he found himself; in time, they would catch up to him.

After a few minutes of staring blankly over the steel guard rail that protected any wayward motorists from plunging down a grassy hill, he walked back to his own car and came to sit against the rear driver's-side tire. The ground was cold and a little damp under him, but he appreciated the reminder he was still real. He leaned his head back and tried to remember what was true. It was a twisted version of the grounding exercise he had performed in the past when he came too close to losing himself in the thoughts of the criminals he studied, as the single truth that came to mind eclipsed all others.

Will could feel the seat of his suit pants soaking up the dampness from the earth underneath him. He wanted to sink into the soil, be swallowed whole by it. An odd end to an odd life.

Back in the car, Will drove first to Quantico. It was after 8:00 PM on a Saturday night; he did not expect anyone to be present. He parked in front of the BAU building and gazed at the institutional architecture. As much as Will wanted to work for-- or with-- the FBI, large, impersonal buildings like this unnerved him: They felt like a trap. When Will entered the building each workday, a part of his mind warned him that if he did not turn away, he would be stuck there forever. Since he was a young man, he lived with the understanding that there was a cage somewhere with his name on it-- it was only a matter of where, when, and what route he took to find it. He had no doubt working within the formidable building tempted fate each day.

Tonight, the sliver of his mind that still considered him Special Agent Graham-- formerly Officer Graham-- begged the structure to speak to him, to command him to do the only thing he should and call Jack Crawford then and there. However, the BAU building sat impassively in the dark, silent and unmoved by the pleas sent forth.

Will held his phone, stared at it like an enemy, and didn't attempt to dial. He thought about how the building would look in the light of Monday morning-- and how he would look standing before it. He envisioned himself as an animated corpse, dead inside and propelled forward by muscle memory. Would he burn when he tried to cross the threshold, uninvited by the gods of justice due to his own sin of omission? Would the building snap awake and finally swallow him whole?

Will drove home without calling Jack.

He wondered what the next step was in casting himself into self-imposed exile; he felt the need to escape. He tended to his dogs methodically and hoped they didn't notice he had returned to them somehow transformed; he felt only half-changed, a caterpillar stuck in its cocoon. He put on more comfortable clothing, packed a backpack haphazardly, then returned to his still-warm car and drove. He planned on arranging for the care of his dogs when the sky lightened, but he had many hours of darkness between now and then.

He drove on I-95 South for three hours before stopping. During the drive, he didn't turn on the radio; instead, he spoke to himself when the silence became too much. Will came back to the truths he had earlier tried to determine and searched again as he gripped the steering wheel too tightly, leaving marks along the insides of his fingers and palms.

He told himself he was Will Graham.

He told himself he was okay, safe.

He told himself he worked for the FBI and that Jack Crawford was his friend.

He told himself Hannibal used him as a tool, a form of protection against Crawford's iron justice.

He told himself Hannibal was a killer and a monster.

He repeated these mantras until he crossed the state line into North Carolina. It was greener the further he went, snow rarely doing more than dusting the South. The expanse of shadowy, deep green trees along the interstate combined with the anonymity he felt among the sixteen-wheelers and overnight travelers smoothed the harshest edges of his anxiety. When he did finally stop, it was at a nondescript gas station that looked like it used to be a Shell. In the restroom, he splashed his face with cold water, not to wake himself but to feel the sensation. He wished, for a moment, that it was summer. He could find a creek and fall in, submerge himself until his lungs burned and his body became truly weightless. In the mirror, his face was pallid and his eyes were empty. The last few days had been harder on him than he'd realized.

In the store, he got gas, a stale coffee, and a few packs of peanut butter crackers. Will didn't trust himself to eat yet but liked knowing he had them all the same.

Traveling southward again, the earlier chant didn't come so easily. It was difficult to trust the haunted, weakened version of himself he saw in the mirror under those unkind fluorescent lights. The safety and privacy of the woods mellowed the urgency he felt earlier. He was

wrapped tightly in the forest with nobody close enough to hear his thoughts or find them written across his face in an unguarded moment. The freedom gave him a new incantation, one he thought might be closer to the whole truth:

He told himself he was a liar.

He told himself he would never be okay and it had nothing to do with Hannibal or Jack.

He told himself Jack was his friend second to being his *handler*.

He told himself he'd kill Hannibal before he let the man be executed by the state or jumped by a fellow prisoner with an inferiority complex.

He told himself Hannibal was a killer.

He told himself Will Graham was also a killer.

He told himself it was possible to be a killer but not quite a monster

Will didn't stop again until he hit Raleigh. He got a hotel room outside the city center and fell asleep fully dressed shortly before dawn. When he woke up, Will thought first of the furry gang that would be waiting for a trip outside and breakfast. He thought about messaging Alana to ask her to check on his dogs; she would do it, if not for him then for them. He realized with a grimace that he felt a little ashamed-- slimy-- to ask her to do this for him when she was unaware of what had transpired between him and Hannibal.

He thought through his options, though he knew there was only one person he would call.

"Hello?" Beverly answered with audible curiosity, her voice lifting upward at the end of the word.

"Hey, Beverly. Sorry to bother you, but I need a favor."

"Is someone dead?"

Will looked upward at the textured paint on the ceiling and realized that yes, there were deaths involved in the series of events that led to him needing her to feed his dogs.

"I went fishing," he stated, the lie rolling off his tongue. "Supposed to be a day trip to North Carolina, but I was too tired to drive home last night. Think you could let my dogs out? Maybe feed them? I hate to ask…"

He let his request trail off, fully aware that Beverly's intrigue would top whatever inconvenience it would be for her to trek out to Wolf Trap.

"I could do that. Might even throw in a game of fetch if they ask nicely."

Will smiled just a bit and replied, "They will. They're terrible guard dogs."

“Then they won’t mind me drinking your good liquor and rifling around your medicine cabinet.”

He did give an amused exhale then, not entirely believing the snooping part was a lie.

“Just make sure you top the bourbon off with water.”

“Deal.”

Will ended the call and sent her his address, and she said she would head there shortly.

Relieved, Will ordered room service around 11:00 and spent the bulk of the afternoon staring at the television, the volume too low to hear well. He wasn’t watching any programs, just letting the images move in front of him. The Home Shopping Network, he found, was a fascinating series of crazed grins and flashing prices, appropriate enough background music for his own controlled descent into madness.

Every thought Will had carried with it a counterargument and more questions; he spun himself in circles trying to suss out the truth.

If he condemned Hannibal as a murderer, did that mean he, too, deserved the same?

If he gave Hannibal to Jack, should he admit that he killed Tobias Budge willfully?

If Hannibal had allowed Will to see the truth and remain alive, what was the man’s angle?

If Hannibal had blood on his hands, then so did Will-- at what point was skin so stained it no longer mattered how much or how little there was?

He could avoid these questions. Let Hannibal go. Return to work teaching and profiling. Go back to the life he believed he was carving for himself. Hannibal would continue leading an elegant lifestyle until he didn’t. He would be caught or disappear, and Will would have nothing to do with either. He knew that if Hannibal was apprehended, he would not tell the authorities what Will knew; it served no purpose, and the man would find it indecent to share such intimacies with those he considered his opposition. Hannibal had given him an out-- maybe the only time the Chesapeake Ripper gave any person who saw too deeply into him the opportunity to escape.

In the sterile hotel room, far enough from home for Will to breathe, he recognized the true problem with this passive course of action. He didn’t fear his conscience would keep him up at night. He wasn’t even upset that Hannibal would never adequately pay for his crimes.

He understood that his struggle to *do nothing* was that he could not imagine a reality where Hannibal was free and not part of Will’s world.

Will had no space in him to reflect another’s darkness when he strained to contain his own. If he fully released the sense of right and wrong he had spent years cultivating, something else might too easily slide in and take its place. He could not be sure he could keep the distance he was creating; he could not be sure he knew who Will Graham was.

Perhaps stupidly, Will trusted his ability to predict Hannibal far more than his ability to predict himself. If Hannibal was evil-- and Will couldn't force himself to believe that idea no matter how much he tried-- he was a focused, methodical evil; Will, now especially, was chaotic, emotions yanking him by the collar. It was Will who drove hours in the dark to find a place far enough away for him to breathe; Hannibal, meanwhile, probably slept soundly in his own bed last night. It was Will who did not know who he was or what existence would give him peace; Hannibal seemed quite content with his lot in life, as horrific as it was to the masses.

Check-out time came and went without any front desk workers calling. Will considered using a sick day on Monday. He could email his classes his slideshow and an assignment; they would speculate about his absence, but he doubted any story they crafted could come close to being as unsettling as the truth. Will knew nobody, except possibly Jack, would push too hard to uncover the reality behind his absence because he was exactly the type of person who disappeared for reasons that would only complicate the lives of those who knew of them.

But he missed home. He had never before had a home to miss like he did now, not even as a child, and it wasn't entirely a bad feeling. He was coming to no conclusions hiding out in a different state, nor did he find them with their thumbs out along the highway. He had done this before-- run away, stayed gone-- and found it did nothing but give him too much time with his thoughts. After he had gotten stabbed, he went straight from the hospital to the sheriff's office and turned in his badge; he went from there to New Mexico and nobody heard from him for two weeks. All he decided then was to get his master's degree; he still had a wound in his shoulder, and he still had no desire to be a police officer any longer.

Will showered, changed into the hodge podge of clothing he had brought with him, and checked out. Then, he walked himself to the hotel bar where they served a lunch and dinner menu, and he ordered a carby, meaty concoction that sounded like it would resemble a BLT. He got a single shot of whiskey on the rocks for good measure.

The bartender hovered near him, nobody else to serve. She was an attractive, dark-haired woman with a young, round face but hints of laugh lines that suggested she was closer to Will's age than he first thought. She reminded him a bit of Alana, the same softness offset by mischievous eyes. If he ran his hand along her face, he would not feel the angles of carved cheekbones or the firmness of a set jaw; if his hand wandered further, he would not find lean solidity; if he stood nearer, he would not feel heat radiate from between them. He wanted to be tempted to casually flirt with her, maybe ask her when her shift ended even though he knew he'd be gone by then; it would've felt good to be so scornful that he could immediately see the appeal in a human other than the one he had turned away from. However, Will was not a scorned lover, and he did not feel any temptation whatsoever, so he stared into the liquid in his glass and thought morosely about how the color of the bourbon was terribly close to the shade of brown eyes illuminated by the light from a fireplace.

The bartender must've developed a sixth sense for men hurtling toward depression-- a good skill in her field-- as she interrupted Will's self-pitying thoughts.

"Nobody looks at their liquor like that unless they just lost their job or their woman," she said with a friendly tone and an accent that sounded more East Tennessee than North Carolina.

She leaned on the bar to face him and asked, “So, fired or broken up?”

Will considered her words. He had been broken up with, had even done the breaking up, before and this was much worse than that.

“It was more of an implosion,” he answered in a low, sardonic voice.

Her smile didn’t wane.

“I hope you got some fireworks before it went up in smoke,” she cheerfully, suggestively remarked as she grabbed a rag from somewhere beneath the bartop and wiped down the already-clean wooden surface near Will’s arm.

Will didn’t respond, but he felt his face warm, and her laugh let him know she noticed as well. It was infectious, and he felt an embarrassed half-grin working its way along his jaw. It was nice to be normal for a few minutes, just a sad guy getting over someone it didn’t work out with. She was very good at her job.

“Sheila,” the woman said after her laughter died down.

“Will,” he named himself.

“Local or out of town?”

“Out of town. Going straight home from here.”

“What’s your hurry?” she questioned, craning her head to the side at the trite yet flirtatious question.

“Work. Dogs,” Will answered and took a small sip.

“What kind of dogs?” She was trying hard to find something to discuss. Sheila turned to grab the plate of food from the small window connecting the kitchen and the bar lounge. She put it down in front of Will and returned to her position leaning on the bar across from him.

“I think the answer to that is ‘six’,” he replied and put a fry that tasted more like oil than potato in his mouth.

"Lord, six?" she repeated. "Is that what caused the *implosion*?"

It was a joking question-- one meant to either get him rambling about his real problems or how he came to live with six canines. Neither option appealed to him. Sheila was a transient in his world, and it may have been his surly mood, but he didn't particularly appreciate her over-friendliness.

"No, he was fine with the dogs. Just couldn't be with someone I didn't trust not to slit my throat." Perhaps he was being a bit dramatic, but it got the desired effect: Sheila looked taken aback, eyebrows raised and mouth opened in halted speech. He was tired of this conversation and not particularly looking for a fight, so he added, “And I think I need the check.”

She nodded, didn't look at Will directly, went to the register, and prepared his tab. As she pressed buttons and stuck the receipt in the plastic holder, Will ate as much of the concoction on his plate as he could. When the black plastic credit card holder was placed down next to him, Will immediately put too much money--in cash-- behind the receipt.

Sheila did not ask any further questions.

Will ate less than half of the sandwich and barely touched his watery drink. He slid off the barstool and escaped, not making eye contact with another soul on his way through the lobby and parking lot. He locked the car door behind him as soon as he entered the vehicle. He leaned his head against the rest behind him and closed his eyes, stomach turning from the sudden coating of grease. With his eyes closed, his mind took the opportunity to torment him and replayed the sound of a smooth, accented voice describing how to make a proper grilled cheese sandwich.

He would've expected the serenade of the Chesapeake Ripper to be more threatening than that.

Just before six, he pulled into his own driveway, the farmhouse soothing his frayed nerves; the sight of noses clouding the bottom of the window was a balm. As soon as the door opened, he was assailed by furry blurs. They made him laugh genuinely and without condition. This was untainted love, the kind Will could understand.

He unpacked as the dogs ran across the yard, enthused by the reappearance of their human. Buster, of course, ran only a single lap and then sat by the front door, his tiny, aging legs happier in front of a fireplace than in a field. Will walked around his home appreciating each sacred wall and the protection it offered him. He had made at least one good decision in the last forty-eight hours: Returning home instead of running further.

The next day, he woke up, showered, changed, forced himself to eat a piece of wheat toast with peanut butter-- his version of a filling breakfast-- and packed himself a lunch with at least one green item in it. He made it to class on time, didn't strike new fear into anyone's heart, and returned home without incident. He walked with his dogs, grinning into their upturned faces when they brushed against him and throwing sticks for them to chase. He made dinner for all of them-- including himself-- and avoided the liquor bottle now tucked under the kitchen sink. He graded papers, read the news on his laptop, and then went to bed at a reasonable hour. It was a sane, stable life; it was the life one led when recovering from a grave illness or a brush with destruction. It felt like penance for coming too close to his own sublime destruction.

Will performed this routine on repeat for three weeks-- three weeks he could later only remember as a numb time when he felt nothing, tasted nothing, saw nothing-- before fate intervened. Its harbinger was, as Will should have anticipated, Jack Crawford.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

> Love hearing your kind words and wishes! Thank you so much for continuing to read (and the lovely comments)!!! 💜💜💜

Will graded papers at his desk after his evening class. It was dusky outside, but spring was trying desperately to win the war against winter. Jack rapped twice on the door, announcing his presence. Will's head shot up, alert at the intrusion. He hadn't so much as laid eyes on Agent Crawford since the examination of Freddie's body; the absence of Jack's looming shadow had been so noticeable that Will wondered if Bella had taken a turn for the worse. Still, there Jack stood, formidable as ever.

"Jack," Will greeted first, emotionless. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"Don't sound so happy," Jack retorted, and the hint of grin rounded the man's cheeks. "Not yet anyway. I've got news you'll want to hear."

For three weeks, Will had existed in the ether. Each day, he sent his body into the world, leaving his mind hidden in a stone fort somewhere in the clouds. He ate but tasted nothing; he touched but did not feel; he observed but did not see. As long as Will had longed to be real in the world, he now found it preferable to retreat into a fortress of his own making. Over the years, he had honed the skill of holding his thoughts captive-- compartmentalization seemed too weak of a word for what Will had to do to bridle his vivid mind. He now used this learned skill every moment of every day to allow himself to lead some semblance of a normal life while his mind ranted and raved and paced the corridors of its confinement.

But when Jack said he had news Will wanted to hear, for the first time in almost a month, Will felt something in both his body and his mind, the two aligned. His stomach dropped, and his first thought was little more than a flash of a sickening vision.

"The Ripper?" he asked, his voice flattened by decades of imitating people who truly could not muster enough feeling to care.

Jack didn't notice-- or noticed it and attributed it to anticipation. He shook his head, then said, "When it's the Ripper, I'll bring champagne. We might be toasting soon." The man let a heavy pause pass as Will covertly held his breath. "Abel Gideon has been captured, alive."

Will's eyes widened and his brows quirked up. He stood, grabbed his coat, and was on Jack's heels going down the hallway in a matter of seconds.

Jack tossed words over his shoulder as they walked:

“He was caught burglarizing the home of one of his former colleagues. The doctor and her husband are out of town visiting her folks. Gideon looks rough-- don’t think he had anywhere to go.”

“Guess murder doesn’t pay the bills,” Will wryly offered. One side of Jack’s mouth raised at the joke.

“Apparently not. They had a silent alarm system installed a month ago. Local PD showed up. Thankfully, one of them recognized him. It won’t hit the papers yet.”

The duo paused at the door to the back half of the interrogation room, Jack’s hand on the knob. He looked at Will conspiratorially and remarked, “Finally got our bait.”

In the narrow space behind the two-sided mirror, Will stood between Jack and Alana. He wondered how long she had tolerated the armed guard and security detail before she shoved them off; he hadn’t spoken to her in weeks now. She was too focused on watching Abel Gideon to scold Will for his disappearance from her life-- not that she had made any great effort to seek him out either.

For his part, Gideon looked a bit thinner and more unkempt, but he was otherwise the same as Will remembered; it was possible Will’s expectation for Gideon was somewhat lower than Jack’s, particularly after the night in the woods when Will deemed him unfit for life. The man’s arms were crossed over his chest, and he reclined defiantly in his seat. Though Gideon was alone in the interrogation room, he must have been aware he was being watched, as he had picked up singing “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall” in a grating voice while staring directly at the mirror. He was on bottle number 45 when Will and Jack joined the others.

Beverly was at the far end of the line-up-- Will hadn’t seen her at first-- and she leaned back to whisper loudly, “This is the fifth time we’ve heard it.”

Will's amusement at Beverly’s pseudo-revelation faded when Jack looked at him with burning, determined eyes and questioned, “How do we get him to cooperate with us?”

Will looked back at Gideon and took a deep inhale, considering the man and his antics. Gideon only acted in order to get what he desired. There was no appealing to his sense of protecting the greater good-- that did not exist-- and tricking him was a waste of time. They had to offer the only thing Gideon had failed to procure for himself.

“We can’t give him a plea deal, and he’ll know if we’re lying,” Will began. “Give him what he wants: Gideon helps us catch the Ripper, he gets to have him.”

Jack cocked an eyebrow at Will.

“An interview, cells next to each other, group therapy-- it doesn’t matter as long as Gideon gets access to him. That’s what he wants,” Will finished certainly.

Jack considered the idea, eyes drifting to a point on the glass in front of him. He nodded slowly once, then focused his gaze on Abel Gideon. His stare didn’t waver as he walked toward the door leading to the formal interrogation room where Gideon awaited him.

When Gideon saw Jack, his singing died in his throat, and he smiled as smugly as he could in handcuffs.

“Dr. Gideon,” Jack formally acknowledged him.

“Agent Crawford, yes? I’m terribly sorry I don’t recall you more clearly-- it’s all run together a tad,” Gideon responded, blinking slowly at irregular times, as though he had to remember to do so. His voice carried the same arrogance Will remembered from the hospital.

“Understandable,” Jack answered, still on good behavior. “Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Gideon sighed, rolled his eyes dramatically, and said in a bored tone, “I killed them all. I confess. There-- do we still have to talk about it?”

In his peripheral vision, Will saw Alana shift her weight. He was glad she had not gone into the interrogation room.

“If you’re not in the mood to talk about your murders, we can table that discussion for later. Why is that topic uncomfortable for you?” Jack maintained a professional but personable tone. He had his hands laced in front of him and his elbows on the table, making his mountainous expanse of shoulders look marginally narrower and his body seem more tired, as though he needed the table for support. It was a smart way to get Gideon talking-- the man loved power.

“I don’t *feel bad* if that’s what you’re getting at. They were all just so terribly dull. You kill someone, gussy up their corpse, and then wait around. All dressed up and nowhere to go,” Gideon was giving Jack a shark’s smile now, toothy and threatening.

“Bodies don’t have a habit of going places on their own, Dr. Gideon,” Jack replied neutrally, weakly. Will was impressed by how much Jack let Abel Gideon dominate their rapport. “Were you hoping someone would come to you instead?”

Gideon gave a single, mocking laugh and looked at the overhead light, then at the mirror behind Jack’s head.

“How many people are back there waiting for me to tell you about the Chesapeake Ripper?” he asked, tauntingly. “Dr. Chilton? *Dr. Bloom*?”

Alana let out a hard exhale, angry at hearing her name in the man’s mouth.

Gideon went on, “How about Agent Graham? Had a lot of fun with him in the woods. I think there are a few wires loose, though--” then, in a stage whisper, “--better check under the hood.”

Will didn’t allow himself to visibly bristle, and with his feelings still so thoroughly contained, he found he was not as offended as he ought to be. He felt Alana’s gaze on him, but he did not look back at her.

Jack tilted his face downward and looked at Gideon with less friendly eyes.

“There are a few agents and associates listening in. Not too many. We’ve had more.”

Gideon grinned too quickly for it to be entirely false; he enjoyed being antagonized in return for his own snide remarks.

Jack continued, transitioning away from his meek opening, “We find your kills interesting, but it isn’t the only reason I’m here. You wanted to meet the Ripper; that’s something you and I have in common.”

“You come bearing a plea deal?” Gideon inquired, sarcastic but still engaging with Jack.

“No, Dr. Gideon, there will be no plea deals. You will go to prison for a long, long time,” Jack answered without apology. He let a moment pass, Gideon growing more interested. “I’m offering you something to make those years pass a little bit easier. You want the Ripper? Help us catch him, and he’s yours. Want to chat for hours? You can use this room. Want him within earshot all day and all night? I’ll make sure he has the cell next to yours.”

Gideon’s brow had a single furrow across it, and his eyes were slanted minutely shut. He appeared to be genuinely considering the offer.

“What if I kill him?” Gideon asked, testing the waters.

Jack shrugged and relaxed back into the seat.

“What’s one more life sentence?”

Gideon looked Jack over.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he intoned. “I help you lure the Ripper, I get to share a wall with the man of the hour. One more condition.”

Jack looked at him, waiting patiently.

“Dr. Bloom will be present at the *rendezvous* with our mysterious friend. Agent Graham will not.”

Will and Alana both glanced over, catching each other’s eyes and riding a simultaneous wave of frustration. He suspected Gideon held no ulterior motives other than tormenting Alana and punishing Will for taking a stick to his body in the forest. The petulant doctor was flexing what little muscle he had in the situation by taking away something he assumed Will wanted and forcing it onto Alana’s lap. For his part, Will sensed both relief and fury rattling in their cages in his mind; he held them equally at bay.

“He wants us to know we don’t control him,” Alana snapped.

“Maybe. Or he’s angry he can’t kill us now,” Will returned.

Within the gray walls of the interrogation room, Jack did not so much as glance back at the mirror when he said, “Done.”

Alana gave a disgusted sigh and left, the door closing hard behind her. Beverly and Will glanced at each other at the sound.

Jack began leading Abel into a discussion of the clues he had left for the Ripper in the murder of Dr. Maynard. It gave Gideon a chance to feel intelligent-- an expert on the subject of the Ripper. Will tuned the sound of his voice out, having no desire to hear the doctor drop facetious barbs among his hypotheses regarding the Ripper's thinking.

Will already knew more than enough about how the Chesapeake Ripper thought and the reasons why he didn't accept Gideon's feeble invitation. Hannibal had once told Will the Ripper was no more threatened by Gideon than a hawk was by a songbird; Will now had to agree that he had no reason to swoop down from his lofty position to silence a chirping idiot.

Beverly came to stand next to Will, and he felt her looking at his face. They were the only two in the back room now.

"Can I help you?" Will asked, a joking question in a serious tone.

"May I speak to Will Graham? I've only seen his representative since his *fishing trip*," she stated, equally serious.

Will turned to look at her fully, meeting her eyes and frowning at her question.

Will glanced back at Gideon, then at the ceiling. He sighed, ran his hands over his face, and crossed his arms over his chest. When he looked at Beverly's clear, challenging eyes, he felt his resolve weaken. She had picked up the phone when he called, and she had done what he asked with minimal reluctance. She earned the right to ask these questions through those actions and, more importantly, her friendship.

She must've noticed him softening toward her, so she pushed ahead.

"What happened?"

It was a question she could not know was too loaded to possibly answer honestly.

"Things didn't work out...with the person I was seeing," Will answered, forcing the words out and feeling horribly unprepared for the conversation. "Still getting back to normal."

"It ended badly," she added to his admission.

"Worse than that," Will corrected.

She looked his face up and down, searching for clues.

"Do you-- we-- hate him?" she questioned, and Will appreciated her allying herself with him automatically, even if it was a foolish thing to do.

Will shook his head and gazed absently at Jack and Gideon.

"No. Wish we did."

It would be easier.

Then, he added, “I’ll be okay. Just a rough patch.”

Beverly was thinking over his words, and he could tell she did not believe him and was not quite finished yet. She joined him in watching the interrogation room for a few seconds. Then, without looking at him, she spoke again.

“I know who it is.”

Will controlled his expression and did not look at her as his mind first howled in panic, then calmed itself. She was referring to the identity of the mysterious person he’d been seeing, not the Ripper. He felt on edge, his bottled emotions stirring too close to the surface now.

“Think so?” Will replied.

Beverly was very still as she elaborated on the source of her theory.

“He was on my list of suspects. You were good-- you never brought him up. But when I did or Alana did...you talked about him. You don’t do that often.”

She paused for a moment, and Will did not deny her words. He could not deny them even though he hadn’t realized he had given himself away to a careful enough observer.

“And when I was at your house, I saw a box,” she added hurriedly.

Will gave her a disbelieving look, but she cut him off before he could voice his complaint.

“I wasn’t snooping. Kitchen tables are fair game.”

He had left in a flurry and hadn’t attempted to hide the box. In fact, it still sat in his kitchen, a ghost in the corners of his eyes when he walked through the room.

They stood side-by-side without speaking for a few more minutes, listening to Gideon drone on as he told the story of how he ambushed Chilton and got him to the observatory. Frederick had been awake and more or less well for days now, so this story had already been thoroughly told multiple times and in agonizing detail. If anyone ever forgot the tale, Will was certain a book was forthcoming to remind them.

“He wasn’t what I expected,” Beverly commented from beside Will, still watching the two men in the interrogation room.

Will glanced at her, realizing she was circling back to the conversation he had hoped was finished.

“What *did* you expect?” Will asked, not able to resist.

She smiled, still looking ahead.

“You live in the woods with more dogs than I can count on one hand. Your hobbies are fishing, fixing things, and murder-- and these are all reasons I think you’re great.” She added the last part hastily, turning her head to see Will looking annoyed. “He seems very...urbane.”

Will countered, “Is that a polite way of saying he’s a snob or a veiled way of saying you find him charming?”

Beverly shrugged.

“A little of both.”

“You’re not wrong,” Will replied.

Beverly gave him a sly grin in return. The painful tightness in his neck loosened.

The tension broken between them, they returned to listening to the scene unfolding behind the glass in companionable quiet. Jack was working his way toward launching into his plan. Will was curious to hear what the two of them would decide was a fitting lure for the Ripper. Gideon had utterly failed in his attempts to attract the elusive killer, and Jack’s inability to catch the killer was becoming legend. Besides, Hannibal wasn’t the type to snap at any hook drifting by; even Will thought he would be challenged to find something that would prove tempting enough to flush Hannibal out of hiding.

Jack now sat with his legs crossed and one arm hung over the back of the chair, a practiced casualness.

“Gideon, you left the Ripper an invitation-- he didn’t come. It’s our turn to try.”

Gideon’s nose was in the air and his eyes were examining a corner of the room and, apparently, finding it foul.

“Agent Crawford, the FBI has had its turn for years. He slips through my fingers once, and you want to slap my hand. Doesn’t seem fair…,” Gideon trailed off with a haughty, long-suffering sigh.

Jack chuckled once, dryly. “Maybe it isn’t, but if we get him in the end, it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Never met an end that didn’t justify its means. I admire that in a man. If you were successful, I might admire it more.”

Jack leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table in front of him.

“We’ve never had this much leverage before,” Jack confidently replied.

“I rarely have the opportunity to say this, but you give me too much credit,” Gideon cooed in a smarmy tone.

Jack smiled too broadly and corrected, “Oh, not you, Gideon. Haven’t you heard? The Chesapeake Ripper is in love.”

Will's heart twisted beneath his ribs, catching his breath in his throat. His chest felt hot and stinging.

"Not the sort of news I read," Gideon responded. "But do send him my congratulations."

Jack's frightening smile didn't falter as Gideon spoke.

"He was angry when the news first reported you might be the Ripper, but he's proven you aren't. Based on your recent kills, he knows you also understand that now. But I have a theory, Dr. Gideon," Jack explained leaning even further toward the other man.

Will felt rapt with anticipation; nothing existed but that room and Jack Crawford.

Jack continued, "The Ripper is just about tired of you, Abel. Let's say you took credit for his work again, knowing it's a lie. Now, if the murder you chose to claim was one he was especially proud of...that'd be more than enough motivation to find you and kill you."

Gideon looked at Jack through his lashes, eyes concentrated on the man across from him and less confident than before.

"It would be difficult for me to enjoy the fruits of our arrangement if I am dead," Gideon evenly responded to Jack's plan.

"We feed a few lines to the media linking you to the murder of Freddie Lounds, and we plant a meeting place in the details. He shows up, comes for you, and we capture him. Nobody needs to die," Jack assured the skeptical doctor.

Abel Gideon would agree to the plan; he had no other choice, and his arrogance prevented him from fully believing death was a possibility. Will knew this just as certainly as he knew Jack's plan would work. A wave of nausea rocked his stomach, then settled into rippling anxiety. He felt his teeth clenched together and consciously loosened his jaw; he forced his hands to hang at his sides instead of balling into fists. He could not make his body go numb again, though, and he felt the barriers in his mind beginning to crack. He stared at the scene without listening.

Around ten minutes later, Jack finally exited and looked back and forth between Beverly and Will. He was obviously pleased with himself-- as he should be, Will admitted.

He clapped a hand on Will's shoulder and needlessly offered an apology.

"I'm sorry, Will. You've done more for this case than anyone; we wouldn't be here without you. But Gideon--"

Will cut off the mechanical explanation: "Gideon wants to feel powerful. It's fine. The Ripper gets caught whether I'm there or not."

Will was not lying. It sickened him at a base level.

Jack nodded approvingly, appreciative of a good soldier.

The rest of the conversation was muted in Will's hearing. He picked up words-- tomorrow, botanic gardens-- and knew enough for it to be dangerous to his mental wellbeing. He broke from the others as soon as he could without drawing attention and went home, not trusting himself to think through the situation he had been placed in while he was within the hallowed halls of the FBI campus.

When he arrived home, the sky dark, he sat in his car with the heater running for many minutes. He had been granted his wish-- he did not have to choose whether to turn Hannibal in to Jack or let him go free. The universe had aligned and decided for him. All that was required was the same complete failure to act Will had exercised the past three weeks anyway. This was as well-deserved a catch as Jack would ever get.

Yet, Will was not completely free from guilt. He was the subject of the scene that would lead to Hannibal's capture. He possessed information that he could not unlearn-- information which could help either Jack or Hannibal. Most upsettingly, he was acutely aware that staying home by the fire while Hannibal was arrested was an act of cowardice Will could not tolerate within himself; he should be the one to look Hannibal in the eyes when the man was apprehended.

But that opportunity had been taken from him by Abel Gideon.

Will sighed wearily and turned off the car. He pushed aside his thoughts long enough to greet the gang waiting by the door and feed them. He ignored the box on his kitchen table and took a pack of saltine crackers and a jar of peanut butter to his front porch. While he watched the dogs run, he had a version of dinner that stuck to his throat and ribs but that was inoffensive between his teeth.

He watched the dogs run and thought of the night Hannibal saw his ship from the far side of the field.

It was wrong to let a stranger arrest him, even if that stranger was actually Jack Crawford.

He had already absently acquiesced to Jack's request that he stay away, though, and he didn't want to draw attention to himself in this case. Will grasped to imagine a scenario that would allow him to tell himself definitively that he had watched Hannibal walk into the trap set for him and had not turned away-- a scenario that would let him fall asleep at night even if it was assured he'd have unsettling dreams.

Thirty minutes and half a sleeve of crackers later, a palatable compromise arrived in his thoughts: The decision to meet Abel Gideon wouldn't be made spontaneously. No, that was not how Hannibal Lecter thought. It would be made from a distance and executed methodically; still, Hannibal's undoing would begin the moment he decided to seek Gideon out. Will didn't have to come near the meeting point to view that and test his resolve.

Tomorrow night, Will would drive into Baltimore.

Tomorrow night, Will would watch Hannibal open his door, close it behind him, and walk to his car.

Tomorrow night, Will would see Hannibal deliver himself to his own execution.

And Will would not stop him.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

> As always, I appreciate you all reading so much, and I love seeing your thoughts-- the funny, the simple, the thoughtful, and everything in between. ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

Early the next morning, Will, Jack, Alana, and a tall, wiry man with thick-rimmed black glasses sat in Crawford's office. The man, Nathan Voss, had large, brown eyes that darted between Will and Jack while avoiding Alana; his small frame was made to appear impossibly slender by his skinny jeans and fitted pea coat. Will could tell Mr. Voss took great care to maintain his appearance, and the look seemed more or less to fit what the college students wore around Baltimore. Voss wasn't much older than them.

When Jack spoke, Will caught the young man wince, though he recovered quickly.

"Mr. Voss, thank you for coming this morning. I apologize for the short notice."

"No problem," Voss eked out, then hastily added, "sir."

Will looked at the wall and put a fist to his mouth to avoid rolling his eyes.

"I won't take much of your time," Jack assured him in as soothing a voice as the agent could affect. "I understand you've recently begun your journalistic career now that Freddie Lounds no longer has a monopoly on crime scenes."

The young man sputtered for a second before replying, "It was very sad, what happened to Freddie. But her readers needed somewhere to go…"

Sourly, Will thought about how disappointed Freddie's readers ought to be with her comparably milquetoast replacement. *CrimeNV* had launched a week to the day after Freddie was found mutilated in a field. Voss's first story was, naturally, a thorough piece on Freddie Lounds' death and the ongoing investigation into her murder. He had taken a questioning approach instead of drawing conclusions, positing that it could have been the Ripper or it may have been another criminal Freddie ran afoul of who wanted to make his displeasure known. Zeller had been very pleased to show Will the article. In the few weeks since then, Voss had quickly begun to embrace a more sensationalist writing style as Freddie's readers flocked to his site.

"Yes, it was a tragedy," Jack answered without emotion, drawing Will back to the conversation. "But you can help get justice for Freddie."

"There's good ad revenue in justice," Will snidely added to Jack's sales pitch.

Nathan was still too bewildered to be appropriately offended.

“What do you want from me?” he finally asked the men, the first intelligent words he uttered that morning.

“Just a story. Maybe you offer your readers a hypothesis we can support,” Jack explained, still affable toward the journalist.

Behind his glasses, Nathan looked less than convinced.

“You want me to lie?” he questioned.

“No,” Jack quickly denied. “It would be convenient if your thoughts aligned with ours.”

Alana crossed her arms in front of her chest and sighed, exasperated.

“Write what Jack tells you to and we’ll give you the biggest story of your career on a silver platter tomorrow morning,” Alana said in a commanding tone that bluntly cut the dance between the two men short.

Will remembered why he appreciated Alana.

“How big are we talking?” Nathan asked, sounding like Freddie for a brief moment.

“You could get a book out of it. One people would buy,” Will tempted the young man.

There was a dim hunger in Nathan’s eyes at the mention of a book deal, and Will knew then the boy would acquiesce. The three older adults stared at the young man silently, waiting for his response. Voss shifted in his seat and scanned the room, avoiding their eyes.

“What kind of story do you want me to write?”

Jack gave him a restrained smile, one that spoke of approval with a cherry of condescension on top, then replied, “Revisit Freddie Lounds’ death. There could be an argument that her murderer was Abel Gideon.”

“What makes you think that?” Voss inquired.

Jack looked Voss in the eye when he lied: “The first report of Ms. Lounds’ disappearance was close to the time Dr. Gideon escaped custody. The intricacy of the amputations required surgical precision and medical knowledge. Dr. Gideon had recently killed many others in similarly extravagant displays.”

Voss thought over Jack’s ideas, then offered his rebuttal, staring at the floor, “Abel Gideon killed his doctors and hospital employees, not reporters. Freddie could have been gone for weeks before Gideon escaped.”

Agent Crawford’s bullish smile remained fixed on Voss’ face as he said, “You’re creative.”

“Anything details that might...persuade my readers?” Nathan fished.

An irritated exhale hissed through Will's lips, and he tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. He spoke to the shadowy surface above him.

"The flowers were camellias and primrose. The killer wanted someone to know he loved them…," Will didn't let his voice reveal him, "...couldn't live without them. Before he killed his wife, Gideon had an impressive garden."

Nothing Will claimed was a lie; he had seen the photos of Gideon's blood-spattered home and the garden where he had first attempted to bury his wife. Will doubted Gideon had ever touched a shovel previous to that encounter. He could feel Nathan Voss' eyes on his reclined form. Voss was rationalizing with himself, reasoning that if it was at all possible Gideon could be the murderer, he would be able to maintain the semblance of journalistic integrity he, tragically, aspired to project. Will understood intimately the need to tell one's self a convincing story to make the bites of truth more palatable.

"Okay," Voss replied, shakily, and Will looked at him again with bored eyes. "Give me a few hours."

Jack again offered his superficial, patronizing smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Voss," Jack replied, a dismissal. He glanced toward the door to drive home his point.

Eager to leave, Voss nearly launched himself out of the chair. He didn't look at any of them as he left. Will supposed it was good self-preservation, really. Voss sensed a trap and escaped; Will had sensed that same trap the moment Jack Crawford came into his classroom, but he had circled it, learned the mechanism that made it spring, then fooled it. *Was* fooling it.

With Voss out of the room, Jack's face hardened into stern neutrality.

"What now?" Alana asked, still irritated by the mere fact she was involved in the operation whatsoever. Will couldn't blame her-- how dramatically had Abel Gideon uprooted her life only to now demand she serve as the audience for his moment of glory.

The senior agent couldn't completely mask his anticipation as he explained, "We wait. Tonight, we go to the gardens. Plain clothes officers, unmarked vehicles, live cameras surveilling the scene. We'll keep Gideon in sight as long as we can. Hope the Ripper shows up. Alana, you won't be near the action. Will, we'll keep you posted-- stay near your phone."

"Jack, this won't work," Alana pleaded. "We're indulging Abel Gideon's fantasy and wasting our time. The Ripper won't come out of hiding to prove himself to that man."

Will didn't look at her when he refuted, "It'll work. Unless he realizes Gideon is bait, it'll work. The Ripper is arrogant. He wanted Freddie Lounds' death to be...singularly impressive."

Jack glanced between them and spoke to a point in the middle of the room, saying, "Maybe it will; maybe it won't. We'll try. Be back here by 6 PM, Dr. Bloom. We want to be in position by sunset."

His command received, there was nothing more to say.

Will drifted through his morning classes, thinking of all the things Hannibal would never do again after that night. As he gave his students a moment to examine a gory crime scene photo projected overhead, he thought about Hannibal sitting behind his desk, reading notes before his 10:30 appointment. Around noon, he wondered what exotic delicacy Hannibal had brought for lunch, although the man would not enjoy it much today, as the *CrimeNV* story on Gideon and the Ripper had gone live. Readers were flocking to it, vigorously debating the identity of the murderer in the comments section. By 2 PM, local news had picked up the story and were hounding the FBI for more details; Hannibal would see that, too. He would seethe under his immaculate facade as he conducted his late afternoon appointments. These patients were typically retirees and depressed ladies who lunch; Hannibal wouldn't miss them when he was in prison.

The idea of only seeing Hannibal behind bars-- or a wall of glass-- still unsettled Will. It strengthened his resolve to go to Baltimore that night, to prove who he was to himself and, admittedly, to Hannibal.

Will left for Baltimore just before 5 PM, not wanting to risk missing the moment he had begun to hinge his entire sense of self on. He was either firm enough in his convictions to watch something he had, in a way, set in motion escalate to its inevitable conclusion or he was not. He needed to know if that weakness and doubt lay within him; he needed to know he had wholly left Hannibal behind when he walked out of the man's door a month earlier.

He drove by Hannibal's office first and was concerned when he saw no car there. Hannibal had either cancelled his last appointment or the universe had decided to yet again deprive Will of clarity by having one of the man's clients cancel unexpectedly. He made it to Hannibal's house as quickly as traffic allowed and felt warm trickles of relief slide through his stomach when he spotted the distinct vehicle.

He parked on the street behind an SUV, keeping a good distance away from Hannibal's stately home. He chose a spot shaded by a tree; the sun still set too early in late February, so with the tree blocking the street lamp, he and his car would soon be concealed in blackness.

From the safety of his den, Will watched Hannibal's front door. Any comfort he had taken in realizing he had not missed Hannibal's departure was soon eclipsed. His throat felt closed and stinging, as though he'd gulped mouthfuls of seawater; his chest was bound by tightened muscle, and his breathing was shallow from the compression. His hands were clenched, his entire body flexed for movement. Even his teeth were held tightly together, jaw squared. His heartbeat was quicker than it should have been-- quicker than when he killed Tobias Budge, Will darkly thought.

There was something else in him, as well. Something warm and compelling. The familiarity of the door-- of the entire scene-- prompted Will's mind to impulsively release the latch on the gates that kept his memories at bay. It was a longing for what had been, what could no longer be; it was an impossible wish to undo what had been done, unknow what had been learned. It ached more deeply than his nervousness but did not entirely supplant the anxiety. He felt himself torn between wanting to set the home on fire and wanting to barricade it.

It was good that he felt this way; he had felt nothing in so long now. It meant he would be able to look at himself in the mirror when he was home that evening with the understanding he had been entirely honest with himself-- for once in his life.

He waited. It wasn't until after 7 PM that the door cracked open. Will supposed Hannibal had taken the time to make himself a suitable dinner and clean his kitchen afterward; no need to hurry oneself for the likes of Abel Gidoen. Perhaps the polished man had even given himself the extra time to decide precisely what would become of Dr. Gideon, to savor the anticipation.

Will sat up straighter and pressed himself against the cloth of his seat, seeking and hiding simultaneously.

The door opened fully, and Hannibal stepped out. He was a picture of doom in his long black coat, wine-red scarf, and leather gloves. He turned, locked the door, and started down the steps.

This only took a matter of seconds, but for Will, time failed to function as expected.

Will thought back to the conversation they'd had mere days before he closed Hannibal off from his life. Hannibal had asked him how he thought of time; Will had told him it was a stream. He was assured of his own veracity now.

The moment seemed to catch on a jagged rock in the stream, wrap itself around as the rest of the world rushed by. Will saw Hannibal's clear profile, chest rising and falling with breath that proved he was alive just as Will was alive; Will hadn't been sure of that fact until this moment. He observed a human-- collected, powerful, and *tired*-- survey the street then walk toward his vehicle.

The past flowed backward, then, splashing into the present.

The inky vehicle cast in yellowed light could just as easily have been parked on a gravel driveway in Virginia. The light caught the silver strands in the man's slicked back hair, and Will could feel the texture of it under his own fingertips, a stronger sense memory than he could ever remember experiencing prior. The coat should have been hanging neatly in Hannibal's closet as he read one of his leather-bound books by the fireplace instead of wrapped around him as he went into the night; the gloved hands unlocking the car had once been curled into obscene claws as the man grasped at his living room rug to remain fixed to the earth. All images of the past and present were equally real in Will's mind; he could not distinguish them.

Will locked the car door, not to keep Hannibal out but to keep himself in.

The other man hadn't seen him; the Bentley's lights were on, illuminating the side of the street opposite where Will's vehicle was parked. He had chosen the right spot to observe the man's descent. He took deep swallows of air but still felt choked. He reminded himself that this was right-- it was the only right thing he could do. He had failed to turn the man in, but by continuing his recent pattern of utter inaction, the world would right itself without his intervention.

He slid lower into his seat as the other vehicle went into motion. It did not pause until it reached the stop sign at the corner. It turned right and was out of sight-- lost to the darkness just as Will had been the night he left Hannibal's house without looking back.

The sight of the empty doorway and parking space forced him to realize time had, in fact, passed, and he had sat unmoving while it did. Hannibal was gone-- Will had done what he set out to do. Will sat back up, unclenched his fists, but still could not breathe. The longing he felt earlier settled into a molten pool of iron in the pit of his stomach, making him feel ill and overly heated and stuck in place.

He did not feel right. He did not feel just. He did not feel brave.

He felt alone.

Even when Hannibal had been gone from his life-- at Will's sole insistence-- he had existed with the knowledge that the one person who understood him walked freely across the earth. He existed with the knowledge of the slightest possibility that he would be known once more. He had taken that from himself now.

He felt shame, as well. That surprised him more than anything else. Will empathized with people too rapidly, too perfectly for his own good unless he purposefully steeled himself against the flood. Yet, empathy and understanding were not the same; he empathized with Jack Crawford's guilt over Miriam Lass and his lust for justice. He did not understand those things, though-- not as Jack needed them to be understood. But he understood Hannibal. Not completely, no, but he was capable of reaching that point if he allowed himself; he did not enjoy all there was in the man, but he understood him nonetheless.

It was a frightening notion: To be known and to know; to be seen and to see in return.

Will was not sure he wanted that intense, inevitably painful experience, but he was unmistakably certain that the possibility being removed from his life was inciting nothing short of panic in him now.

He didn't think about what he was doing; it was done before anything resembling coherent thought regained control of his mind.

The cell phone was in his hand, the number was dialed, and the ringing screamed shrilly in his ears.

Going to sleep that night, he would think about how stupid he was to call from his own cell phone, no attempt at hiding his identity if-- and when-- Hannibal was apprehended and his phone records were pulled. It did not matter to the part of Will's brain that operated his body in that moment, though.

The ringing stopped, there was a moment of silence, and then the voice Will had heard rattling around in his dreams and daydreams for months now echoed questioningly through the line.

"Hello?"

There was another long pause. Will was still caught in a space of past and present, certainty and uncertainty, elation and horror. He was only stirred to action when he heard his name.

“Will?”

He took a breath that was too sharp; Hannibal would hear it, know it truly was Will on the line. He didn’t want to hear more. He needed to speak, then vanish.

“Abel Gideon was arrested yesterday. He is currently in police custody.”

It was simple, firm, and unambiguous. Whoever waited for the Ripper at the gardens was not the man Hannibal sought.

Will ended the call before there was any response. He stayed in his own vehicle until Hannibal returned home. He watched the fair man park back in the same spot, exit the vehicle under the golden light, look up and down the street curiously one last time, and then go back inside his home.

Time moved backwards; the world had, in fact, righted itself as promised.

Will drove home slowly, not trusting his reactions or situational awareness. He could not say when in time he was; it all ran together now. His stomach untwisted itself, his hands loosened, and he felt exhausted as the adrenaline faded. He did not feel as guilty as he should. He reasoned that Jack was not harmed, Gideon was arrested, and Hannibal was free; he had not allowed any further hurt to enter his world. Seeing Hannibal and hearing his voice might have shaken Will yet again-- a talent the man seemed to have endless stores of-- but he would recover, just as he had before. He would lock away the conflicting feelings and reinforce the forts that clearly had started to crumble. He would go to work and come home and not see or think about the other man.

He might not have been able to hurt him, but that didn’t mean he wanted him in his life.

This was an idea Will could live with; it was one Will could reconcile with all that he had ever known of himself.

After midnight, Jack finally called to deliver the bad news to Will. The conversation was painfully short-- there was nothing to say, and Jack was in no mood to say it anyway. Will stared at the flames in his fireplace as Jack spoke, and he made sounds that more or less communicated sympathy and shared frustration.

The next morning, after a night spent dreaming of moments that ran forward and backward with satisfying perfection, Will began the task of numbing himself once more. He worked with his hands, walked his dogs, and continued the taxing chore of turning the upstairs of his home into *something*. Jack called midday and let Will know they were going to try again that night-- they would try again every day until news of Gideon’s arrest hit the press. Will told Jack he thought that was a good idea and asked to be kept in the loop.

He wasn’t proud of himself for saying those things, but he said them all the same.

Sunday was easier, another day removed from the event that sent Will reeling. Each day, the foundations of his forts became a bit stronger, and his thoughts had to fight that much harder to escape.bIt was the second day of March, and a late-in-the-season snow blanketed the landscape. Will ignored how his head spun when he observed the wintery scene, the feeling that he was traveling backward in time returning ferociously.

This was also the day Nathan Voss decided he didn't much like being under Jack Crawford's thumb and got curious about the agent's interest in the crazed doctor who was supposedly on the loose. This intrigue manifested itself in a lovely interview with an anonymous local police officer who wanted it known that the FBI was not the organization that arrested the infamous murderer. Will predicted pure wrath would soon be seeping from Jack Crawford's pores, directed entirely at the young reporter. Will hoped Voss didn't come to an FBI crime scene any time soon; if he was half as clever and twice as wise as his predecessor, he would invest in a high-powered telephoto zoom lens instead.

Will went to work on Monday and avoided Jack. Everyone avoided Crawford that day, so it was neither obvious nor suspicious when Will did the same. He lectured, struck renewed fear into the hearts of his students when he reminded them of their midterm, and went about life as the odd, semi-reclusive professor with a nose for serial killers.

That was his intention, anyway.

He may have been successful if Peter Bernardone and Clark Ingram had not inelegantly entered his life a few days later.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

> A little bit of a longer chapter, but there was a lot of ground to cover. Thank you again for reading, and I can't wait to hear what you all think ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

Hay, soil, and dried wood weighted the air and softened the animalic musk wafting through the drafty stables. The aroma of old blood and the first hints of decay were dulled by the cold but still pungent, particularly to the officers who had developed a keen nose for the instantly recognizable scents.

In the stall crowded by agents, Will and Jack stood next to one another, examining the gutted horse and the dead woman who had been sewn into her.

“The stable owner identified the woman as Sarah Craber. Usually, we’d suspect cult activity when animal mutilation is involved,” Jack said to Will in a low voice, shoving his hands more deeply into his coat pockets.

“No, not a cult,” Will agreed. “Rebirth. This was personal. He gave her a new mother, a second life.” Will tilted his head and then crouched to look more closely at the torn stitches along the horse’s split belly. “It would be someone with knowledge of the animals in the stable; he had to know the mother was dying without her foal. He didn’t want to hurt the horse. May not have wanted to hurt Sarah Craber.”

Jack listened intently, eyes on the dead woman wrapped in gauzy pink and white uterine tissue.

“He wanted to kill her and then bring her back? Why?”

Will shook his head, uncertainty pulling his features into a grimace.

“Whoever left Sarah Craber here was grieving her. I don’t know if the killer and the man who put her in the horse are the same person,” Will answered, testing the theory as it formed in his mind. “How did she die?”

From just outside the stable, Zeller called, “Strangulation.”

He was chided by Price with a good-humored accusation, “Rubbernecker.”

Will’s head turned quickly, uncomfortable that Zeller was privy to this moment. He preferred to work in solitude; that wasn’t always feasible at a crime scene, though, and Will was still uneven enough in his own definition of himself that requesting the scene be cleared felt like a luxury he did not deserve. He tried to shake the feeling and refocus on Sarah Craber.

“Strangulation is violent-- it’s about control. This doesn’t feel like the scene a person seeking power would create. It doesn’t fit,” Will stated with growing faith in his observations.

Jack, however, looked doubtful.

“One person killed her and another put her in a horse? It’s not common for killers to work together like this,” the agent rebuked Will’s claims without refuting them.

“It’s not *common* for a woman to be sewn into a horse, either, Jack,” Will pointed out with raised eyebrows.

Jack shifted on his feet, then responded, “We’ll see what the lab finds.”

It was Crawford’s version of agreeing to disagree. Will had no evidence that might further his argument at the moment, so he stood and followed Jack out of the stables. Walking down the gravel pathway back to where the line of black vehicles, Jack shared his game plan to a half-listening Will. For his part, Will tried to concentrate on the older man’s words, but the snowy landscape had not yet ceased to unnerve him. It was as though winter had begun over, Will consigned to reliving again and again the night he left Hannibal’s home with the full intention of never returning. Time once more moved both forward and backward, vibrating Will’s sense of reality.

“The stable manager and veterinarian are compiling a list of all employees who knew the animals well enough to do this. We’ll start interviews this afternoon while the lab examines the body,” Jack explained, giving Will a much-needed sense of direction.

Since his failure to catch the Ripper a little over a week prior, Jack had alternated between commanding and frightening. He barked at agents with more venom than was typical, and he had less patience for indecision and argument. He was scarily efficient. Will did not need to wonder at the motivations that drove him to this state of existence. It was more than the pallor of inadequacy that followed any professional failure; it was closer to a moral imperative that he reestablish his authority and expertise in his own mind. Pointing this out, of course, would have been fruitless at best and infuriating at worst, so Will decided for once that discretion sometimes was the better part of valor and kept his mouth shut as he got into the tank of an SUV.
They drove around the stables and fields to the cabin situated closest to the entrance of the estate. A young officer approached the SUV, a paper in his hands. Jack rolled down the window and reached his gloved hand out.

“Agent Crawford, here’s the--”

Jack was rolling the window back up before the young man finished his sentence. If Will wasn’t stuck in a vehicle with Jack indefinitely, he’d have been amused. Or, perhaps, he wouldn’t have been. Will had tried his best not to feel much of anything the past week-- the past month. He walked the earth with his face resting in guarded blankness; he had lived this way for a very long time prior to befriending Hannibal, and he found it all too easy to return to this state. It had never served him well in the past, and he didn’t expect anything different. Still, it was a discomfort he was acclimated to. Waiting in his car in the dark outside of a

serial killer's house had decidedly been neither comfortable nor familiar, and he wasn't eager to repeat the experience.

Their first interview was with a veterinary assistant who looked green when he learned Jack and Will were with the FBI. The second was a trainer whose wife informed them he had been swiftly and forcibly kicked out three nights prior when she found that he had been spending unbilled time with one of his college-aged students; she assured the men that her husband was licking his wounds at his mother's house in West Virginia and offered to show them whatever proof they wanted of her husband's infidelity and subsequent flight. The agents declined and wished her a good day.

The third stop was the first to have an animal visible from the driveway. Will's fingertips tingled, and the blurry image of how the scene in the stable stall unfolded began to take a firmer shape. Nobody came to greet the men or poked an inquiring head out of the open barn door, so Jack and Will approached, cautious but not concerned.

In the doorway of the haggard barn, a menagerie of animals could be seen spied, as could a thin man with his back to the entrance. Jack knocked on the wooden door frame twice, hard enough to elicit a reaction. A cacophony of barks, shrieks, and screeching echoed throughout the barn, and the slim man with the scarred head whipped around to face the duo, though his eyes nervously fluttered over and around them instead of landing on either man.

Jack's booming, bass voice carried over the animals' cries when he called, "Peter Bernardone?"

"Yes," the man confirmed in stuttering, halted speech as he hurried around the room to drop cloths over the cages of the agitated animals.

Jack and Will exchanged a look as Peter continued his task.

"You don't seem curious about who we are," Jack stated, no identifiable emotion in his voice.

Looking a bit chastised and more than a bit self-conscious, Peter asked, "Who are you?"

Jack launched into his spiel, undeterred by Peter's clearly atypical cognitive and neurological functioning, "Agent Jack Crawford and Will Graham. FBI. We understand you worked at Blackbriar Stables and may have had contact with a woman named Sarah Craber. Her body was found recently in very unusual circumstances."

"Yes," Peter answered simply, fiddling with one of the drop cloths. "I heard."

"How well did you know Sarah Craber?" Jack questioned.

Peter fumbled with a lock for a long minute, not answering. Finally, he said in the same uneven speech, "I didn't know her."

Peter still hadn't looked either man in the eye. Will was beginning to think he may not be able to-- at least not in a situation like this, one where he had to answer unexpected questions and manage the stress of having two FBI agents interviewing him about a murder. Will

understood too well the frustration of a brain that prioritized processing the wrong parts of a situation first; Will was lucky to have been born with that particular quirk instead of having had it inflicted on him through what must have been a gruesome injury.

Jack continued, asking the same questions he had the first interviewee, “Would you mind looking at a photograph for me?”

Crawford held the small, glossy sheet out to the skittish man; he did not take it.

Peter Bernardone mumbled something indiscernible to a cage of pigeons, then responded, “I know who she is; I just didn't know her.”

“Just to be sure,” Jack prodded, picture still extended.

Peter awkwardly snatched it from Jack’s hand without looking. He kept his body turned toward the mourning doves. He glanced down at the photo, then let his hand drop, then looked back toward Will and Jack. He repeated this once more, compelling Will to intervene. The tension and fear being broadcast by the man’s body, actions, and tone were too clear to ignore.

“You received your head injury in the stables?” Will inquired, lifting his voice to sound friendlier.

“I was kicked by a horse,” Peter replied, then held the photo back out to Jack.

“Looking and touching are separate events for you? They can’t occur at the same time?” Will posed these questions in a soothing tone, and the man nodded. Will wanted Peter to know this part of him was understood. Will went on, “Stress makes it worse, doesn’t it?”
For the first time, Peter looked Will in the eye. He had a frightened expression, brow furrowed and eyes large in his bony face.

“Are you feeling stressed?” Jack questioned, still calm but obviously suspicious.

“I'm worried about the bird,” Peter responded, as though it was an entirely reasonable answer.

Again, Jack and Will looked at one another with uncertainty.

“The bird?” Will asked, inquisitive but not challenging.

“The bird. The bird in the girl,” Peter clarified. “Is it okay?”

Without segue, Jack bluntly stated, “I need to make a call.”

The man hurried from the barn, though Zeller was already on the line before Jack made it through the doorway. He walked out of earshot. Will realized Peter was still waiting for an answer.

“I’m sad for her; I’m sad for the horse. I can’t help them, but I can help the bird,” Peter explained. The sentiment held such consideration for each living creature involved in the

crime that Will could not continue to entertain the thought that Peter Bernardone killed Sarah Craber.

Will looked behind him and saw that Jack was not yet back. He needed to get Peter talking before Crawford returned and scared him into silence.

“Peter, did you put Sarah Craber inside the horse?” Will asked tentatively but plainly.

Peter worked his hands together, took a step one way, then a step another way. He once again avoided Will’s gaze, but he eventually answered, “I didn’t kill anybody.”

“I know,” Will affirmed. “But you did put her body in the horse?”

Peter nodded, then quietly said, “Yes.”

Will watched him as he circled the room, staying further from Will now even as he was relieved by Will’s words. Will guessed at the source of his apprehension, “You know who killed her, don’t you?”

The unsteady man stopped moving and turned toward Will, hanging his head. Will cautiously approached him, walked past him, and sat down on a metal folding chair near a cage with two dogs. They looked like a boxer and maybe a shih tzu, though both were closer to the kind of mutt Will preferred than to their pedigreed counterparts. The dogs crowded the wall, vying to get closer to the new human. Will held his hands out at different heights so that each dog could reach him; he kept his palms open and flat, just beyond the bars. They sniffed, then licked; the shih tzu danced in place, excited, while the boxer hopped as much as he could in the cage. It brought a genuine smile to Will’s face, although he would have preferred to see them without the bars. Still, they had accepted him quickly; they were not abused or wary of men. Peter was taking care of them.

He felt Peter watching him and making his way closer.

“You like dogs?” Bernardone asked.

“I have six at home,” Will responded, not blocking the affection that rose in his voice.

The corners of Peter’s lips and eyes lifted in a crooked smile, but it soon dropped from his face.

“They’ll never believe me. He’ll make sure they don’t believe me,” Peter regretfully answered Will’s earlier question.

“I believe you, Peter. I’ll help you.” Will sounded sincere to his own ears; he hadn’t yearned to help someone like this in years. The closest he had gotten was Abigail, and he knew even that was predicated on him killing her father.

“I have a social worker,” Peter began. “Mr. Ingram…”

He paused but was not finished; however, Jack’s reentry made him snap his mouth shut and avert his gaze from Will to the corner of the room.

“Will, can I speak to you outside?” Jack gave the command in the form of a question.

Will took one more look at Peter before standing and following Jack out of the barn. As soon as Will was a few feet away from the door, Jack turned abruptly and conveyed the information he had learned on his call.

“There was a bird inside Sarah Craber’s body. It’s alive-- they have it in a cage in the lab.”

The blaze in Jack’s eyes told Will that he was now convinced Peter Bernardone had committed the crime. A cold puff of air steamed in front of Will’s face, an exhale that would have been a sigh if Jack wasn’t staring at him from only two feet away.

“I don’t think it’s him,” Will directly addressed the unspoken indictment. Jack looked incredulous, so Will quickly continued before the agent could argue. “He knew about the murder. He put the bird in the body. Hell, he even put the body in the horse. But he didn’t kill her, Jack.”

“Then who did?” Jack demanded, irritated by Will’s reluctance.

“He said he has a social worker, a ‘Mr. Ingram.’ We should interview him.” Will kept to the facts, not wanting to engage with Jack’s building ire. He could take out his residual frustration from the Ripper case on someone else; Will was in no mood for a fight.

“Okay,” Jack conceded. “But I’m getting a search warrant for this place, and we’re bringing Peter Bernardone in for a formal interview.”

Will accepted the compromise without negotiation.

Jack and Will were halfway back to Quantico when Beverly called Crawford. He put her on speakerphone through the car’s radio.

“Beverly, Will’s with me. What’d you find?”

Her voice sounded muffled by the speakers, but Will could hear the currents of excitement.

“Sarah Craber had dirt in her throat. She was in the ground before she was in the horse. We’re using soil tracing to find where the killer buried her. You might not want to get too far from the stables.”

Jack hit the turn signal and pulled what was probably an illegal U-turn. Will settled deeper into the passenger seat, thinking ahead to the long, taxing night before them.

Around midnight, standing among sixteen graves in the unseasonable cold, Will wondered if Beverly would have been more or less enthusiastic if she had known where her investigation would lead. Will picked the animated woman out of the crowd of agents. She was looking over Zeller’s shoulder as he kneeled on a tarp; Beverly waved at something on the ground while he shook his head. Eventually, she made enough room for herself next to him and did whatever it was she had been imploring him to do.

She would have been *more* excited, Will thought.

It was a human moment in the midst of an otherwise harrowingly chilled night. The bodies of fifteen girls and the blackness of sixteen graves created a morbid landscape. All fifteen had been strangled; all fifteen were mostly, if not entirely, nude. Their killer had wanted more than control-- he wanted possession. He wanted to dominate them. He hid them all in a grove of trees so that he could look over all of his most precious belongings at once.

Will closed his eyes and fell into his mind.

They have too much freedom, these girls. Too much freedom and no sense of its use. They wander into my life; I see them at the stables, at work, at the supermarket. When they try to leave, they cannot; this is the only moment they will ever understand the luxury of their freedom. It is mine to take. My hands are a collar around their throats; I brand them. They will always be mine. My touch is the last they will know. I put them in the ground I have chosen for them. I visit them, sit among them. I will fill fields with them.

His eyes blinking open slowly, Will crawled out from behind the gaze of the killer. It was not Peter Bernardone; there was no question in his mind. The killer was domineering; his desire for control would bleed out to stain every inch of his life now that he had indulged it so thoroughly. He was a psychopath; Peter Bernardone was not.

Will repeated the name *Ingram* in his mind, a chant, as he walked among the bodies. He looked into their dirtied, frozen faces and asked them to confirm or deny Bernardone's claim. They laid silent on the ground, giving no hint as to the answer. Will controlled them no more than their killer had; for that, he was thankful.

It was after 4 AM when Will turned his key in the lock of his own front door. He sent out a brief, vague message to his students informing them of their assignment and attached his presentation to it. His classes would have to make do without his presence-- he was certain they would die of heartbreak. Will's throat was raw from the cold, but he lacked the energy to make himself something warm to drink. He kicked off his clothes and slept in his boxers; the prospect of changing was too daunting. When he laid down, he had to throw an extra quilt on top of himself to even begin to thaw his frozen flesh. He knew he would kick it off soon after he fell asleep, suffocating and drenched in sweat as he ran too hot. For the moment, though, it was comforting to have the weight and heat on his body.

He had disjointed dreams of walking through fields laden with petals and feathers instead of grass. He was lost in the fields, but he did not seek his way back to known lands.

He didn't wake until it was nearly noon. The world was both hazy and too bright. His head throbbed. A flash of cold panic went through him as the world "encephalitis" was pulled from his not-so-distant memories; it subsided quickly, though, as he reminded himself that he had not eaten or drunk anything other than black coffee in more than twenty-four hours.

Lying miserably in bed while summoning the energy to rise and tend to his abused body, Will found it impossible not to compare his current lame attempt at recovery to his previous experience traipsing through a wintery forest until the earliest hours of the morning. On that night, he drove from the observatory to Hannibal's house after his ill-fated episode with Abel

Gideon. Taking refuge in another person's house, Will had lacked the satisfaction of walking into his own home and hearing the snuffling, tapping feet of his waiting family; that was one point in his favor. He had also been able to go straight to bed last night; he hadn't slept at all when he went to Baltimore. That was the second-- and final-- point he could claim.

Will could not forget that he had been greeted in the middle of the night by a sleepy man who didn't begrudge Will when he gave into his impulses. He was given dry clothes to wear, and tea and toast had appeared magically before him. There was a breakfast he was fairly sure he didn't deserve at that point in their...whatever it had been. He'd been warmed from the inside out.

Will wasn't sure how many points those things were worth in this unwinnable game he was playing with himself, but he knew he had lost. It was a good memory.

Momentarily finished with torturing himself, Will opened the front door for the dogs, then trudged into the kitchen. He drank three glasses of water, only taking a few short breaths when the glass was being refilled under the faucet. He felt unfathomably thirsty and sickeningly ravenous. Pacing himself through his fourth glass of water to avoid throwing it all back up, he rummaged through his cabinets.

They were woefully barren.

He found a container of old-fashioned oats and figured it was better than nothing. He heated a double serving in the microwave and watched the timer tick down the seconds. When it went off, he brought his gang back inside and dried their paws and the fur on their stomachs. It was the only way he would avoid scalding his mouth.

After eating at last, Will downed a fifth glass of water. He would still be dehydrated, but the ache in his temples had begun to fade. A shower and change of clothes later, he was much improved.

He had not checked his phone yet that morning, but when he did, he was unsurprised to find Jack Crawford had left him two voicemails. The first was from 9:30 AM. Will was disgusted that Jack could be up and functioning so soon after their nighttime crime scene.

"Will, we're calling in Peter Bernardone and his social worker, Clark Ingram, for interviews. Peter's begins at 10:45; Clark's is at noon. I'm having Alana conduct both. Come by when you get in."

The second message was from only twenty minutes ago: 12:52 PM.

"We don't have enough to detain Clark Ingram. The DA's office is pushing for Peter Bernardone to be arrested, but there's no warrant yet. You can watch the interview tapes in my office."

He held the phone out and stared at the lit screen in disbelief. The rage that was born in his stomach at hearing Jack's words snaked its way upward, twining through his ribcage, crawling up his throat, and coiling deep in his mind. He pulled his coat on as he walked to his

car; his burning thoughts prevented him from feeling the chilly air, but the logical part of his mind that was still operating did not allow him to barge into the BAU looking crazed.

It wouldn't help Peter Bernardone.

On the drive to Quantico, Will busied his mind by imagining what Clark Ingram would look like when he finally saw him on the interview tapes. He imagined a man in his 30s or 40s, young enough to be physically strong but old enough to know restraint. He would be dressed nicely, though not expensively; a social worker's salary didn't allow for designer labels. Clark Ingram wouldn't care that he couldn't afford much more than the bare essentials, anyway-- his clothing, along with every other facet of his life, was a disguise meant only to conceal the predator just beneath his skin. A predator, yes, that was precisely what Ingram was. His kills lacked art. He was driven not by a desire to elevate or transform but by his own gnawing compulsion to possess. He would never stop, not even after this close call with the FBI.

By the time Will was seated in Jack's office watching the interview tapes on a computer screen, he had achieved a glassy peace of mind; he was a lake on a windless day, surface smooth but too cloudy to see far below it. His settled mind was projected in his loose movements, relaxed jaw, and even breathing. He watched as Alana pushed Clark to his limits in the interview, finally going too far by placing her hand comfortingly on his arm. The black eyes of a creature gleamed out of his cleancut mask, but he knew himself well enough to end the interview before his claws came out. That was good to know, Will thought.

Will's eyes followed the action on the screen when Peter Bernardone was interviewed, but he struggled to hear him. Ripples went through the crystal lake stretching endlessly in his head, and he grimaced when Peter Bernardone asked about the bird, gaze averted but eyes wide and watery. Peter said nothing new-- did nothing new-- during the interview, yet it ached to see him. The stress of the situation had caused Peter to stutter over his words more and look wildly around the room, dodging Alana's gaze.

Will had told Peter he believed him and that he would help him. He had not been lying or trying to disarm Peter; he had said those words with pure intent, but now it appeared he would fail. A grain of sympathy formed for Jack Crawford and his inability to protect Miriam Lass. Will brushed it away: Peter was not an FBI agent, and Will had not orchestrated his doom. Clark Ingram was the man who led Peter to this position, and it was he who deserved this guilt.

It was unlikely Will could instill in Clark Ingram a sense of remorse. He could ensure the man felt something, though.

Will's stillness of mind returned at this thought.

Jack watched Will while he watched the recording. Will was a blank canvas, a mirror: Jack read his expression as resigned because that was what Jack wanted to see. The screen went black and the large man lurking over Will's shoulder stared down at him. Will imagined this was what a lab sample saw before it was tucked into a box for the rest of eternity.

"What do you think, Will?"

The younger man sighed and frowned; it was what he should do.

“Peter Bernardone is innocent. But it's his word against Clark Ingram’s, so it doesn’t matter, does it?” Will kept his eyes fixed on the black screen as he spoke. He could at least do this for Peter-- be his ally, as useless as that was now.

“It matters,” Jack stated firmly, prickling at the implied insult. He stared at the back of Will’s head until he convinced him to turn.

“What do you think, Jack?” Will asked in an accusing tone.

Crawford’s mouth was a tight line until he answered, “I think there is no evidence to justify arresting Clark Ingram.”

Will left without saying anything further. Jack had been given the opportunity to save Peter Bernardone’s freedom and Clark Ingram’s life; he squandered it.

Will’s newly acquired serenity scared his younger students more than his normal prowling agitation. They watched him like he was the case study instead of the Higgins double homicide, photos of which played from the projector on a loop while the students examined the abbreviated files placed in front of them.

Clark Ingram’s home was not difficult to find. He lived in an apartment complex nearer to Baltimore than the stables. The buildings were townhouse style-- no neighbors above or below. Ground-floor entry. The parking lot was shadowy from the aged security lights. It looked like the kind of place newlyweds expecting their first child would rent; it was sanitary and uniform. Clark Ingram had been drawn to those elements of it-- no need for a personality, no need to make friends. Neighbors leaving as leases expired. Anonymity.

Will parked in the middle of a line of cars. Clark’s apartment was at the end of the row of townhomes; his lights were off, but Will was in no hurry. Tonight wasn’t the night, anyway. When Clark did finally return home, he hauled two brown grocery bags in with him. Will wondered absently if he had been visiting a cashier, checking on her to ensure she was still within his grasp.

Clark Ingram was visible for thirty seconds at most, but it was enough for Will to be sure of his nature. Will’s instincts howled at the very sight of him.

He dreamed of cages that night.

The next day, Wednesday, Will was not called to Jack’s office, which meant Peter Bernardone would be arrested. His morning classes were more seasoned than his late classes, so Will’s moods did not seem to impart the same uneasiness. They were too close to the beginnings of their own careers to fixate on a temperamental professor. He was an expert at being invisible in a room full of people.

Certainty, clarity-- they intoxicated him. Day slid easily toward night as Will’s glorious, opiate calm floated him downstream. When he sat at a traffic light that evening on his way to Baltimore, he let his fingers cover his wrist: 62 beats per minute. It was the same quietness of

mind he had experienced when he killed Tobias Budge, only less blinding and more enduring this time.

However, as the sun set and he came nearer to the turn off for Ingram's apartment complex, he thought for the first time about what would come after the moment Clark Ingram's eyes dimmed. Clean-up and disposal didn't concern him, not after so many years living within the skulls of killers. Guilt didn't worry him either; Ingram did not deserve such a poignant emotion.

No, he was concerned about what would happen to himself-- if this would be the point where darkness outweighed light in the labyrinth of his mind no matter how justified killing Clark Ingram was. This unsettling thought-- that there was a cosmic scale that he was threatening to tip-- caused him to question if the quiet he'd enjoyed the last twenty-four hours had been real or a fabrication of the shadow living within him.

Will drove on, but tension had crept into his hands and shoulders. He wasn't floating anymore.

When he reached his destination, he took his heart rate again. It was 87 beats per minute-- not high but undeniably further from peace.

He locked his car behind him and glanced around before approaching the door. It was unlocked, as he had expected. He slipped inside unnoticed, although Will knew there was life nearby.

Will stood in the dark, heart rate increasing further and body heating rapidly in response. He came to an interior door with a thin strip of light shining through the narrow crack between its bottom and the floor. He waited for the door to open--it wouldn't be long now. Will had no reason to be so sure of this, but he was.

Four minutes later, as Will had anticipated, the doorknob turned. The warmth of Will's body filled the space along with the light from the room being revealed to him as the blackness of the waiting room was invaded by a golden glow.

Silhouetted by the gleaming light of his office, Hannibal appeared in the doorway. It was 7:30 PM on the dot. Hannibal looked at him with neither shock nor pleasure at first. Will surmised he had opened this door at 7:30 PM every Wednesday since Will had left his home with a goodbye that should have been final; he pictured himself standing at the head of a row of ghosts, all bearing his face. He was the specter haunting Hannibal's evenings. Did Hannibal know Will was not merely a shade now?

Recognition came swiftly, Hannibal's eyes glancing up and down Will's physical form. If Will didn't know the man as well as he did, there wouldn't have been enough time between the door opening and awareness flashing through his eyes for Will to know he had done this every week prior.

Will couldn't process Hannibal-- or himself-- in this graveyard; he needed to see the man in the light.

“Got a new 7:30?” Will asked as a greeting. He sounded gravelly and too loud in his own ears.

“It’s yours,” Hannibal replied warmly and took a half-step toward the door frame, giving Will a wide berth.

Hannibal’s shadowed face remained pulled tight and tense, but his dark eyes smiled.

Will questioned once more if time was still moving forward.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the lag! Work is absolutely insane right now, so I've been terribly busy this week. Thank you for reading and hanging in there with me!

Will kept his shoulders squared as he crossed through the doorway into the well-lit room. Walking decisively toward his chair-- it was still his chair-- felt closer to traveling through time than space. The room was unchanged from their first meeting there; in truth, he didn't know how long it'd been since he'd been in the space. They stopped meeting in the office weeks before the cataclysmic end of their relationship, the move prompted in part by Alana's vehement insistence they were trampling psychiatric ethics but in equal part by their own unacknowledged comfort in one another's spaces.

The door clicked closed, and Hannibal walked in smooth strides to his own chair. He fell into a standard pose, legs crossed and head tilted slightly. Had Will not acquired the hard-won skill to detect at least a few of Hannibal's tells, he wouldn't have seen the nearly imperceptible narrowing of his eyes and simultaneous widening of his pupils. Hannibal was tense, curious. In the pronounced creases around Hannibal's eyes and the severe line of his jaw, Will viewed more intimately the weariness he'd seen from afar the night Jack tried-- and almost succeeded in-- capturing the Chesapeake Ripper. Up close, in the familiar setting, he could see now it wasn't exhaustion but emptiness.

The chairs were further apart than Will remembered.

Will let his eyes openly wander across the room and the man sitting opposite him. Hannibal was statue-still, the only movement his breathing. Will had hoped, though not believed, he would be struck with a moment of clarity when he saw Hannibal again. He expected to feel sadness, regret, confusion, maybe blinding rage, but at his core, he was certain he would also feel the weight of certainty settle over his shoulders. He would know Hannibal was a monster in the suit of a man; he would sense it from his core outward to his fingertips, just as he'd felt Clark Ingram's true nature through a video recording. He would see claws and fangs and the shadows of victims, and he would find the world he and Hannibal had briefly shared was a facade constructed to deceive. He would long for his own home and the things in his life that were real.

Sinking comfortably into the chair, Will could have laughed at his own foolishness. Had he known he was lying to himself with each step closer?

Will had drifted through a paperthin life for weeks now, keeping even the suggestion of a feeling secured behind walls of stone. This room was made of more tangible material than most of the people in his life, and by extension, he felt realer by merely existing there. He

had been a ghost, floating through his life and, not infrequently, disconcerting those around him; now, he was once again flesh and blood and bone under the eyes resting on him.

The clock struck 8 PM; neither had spoken. Time moved quickly here.

A quarter until 8:30, Will flickered his eyes toward the fireplace and reintroduced the concept of speech into their silent universe.

“There’s a man who’s been arrested for killing sixteen women. He’s innocent,” Will said, regret tingeing his voice.

Hannibal shifted and took his first audible breath.

“That must be very difficult for you to observe. How do you know he didn’t commit these crimes?” Hannibal spoke dispassionately but continued watching Will.

Will shook his head and sighed, the very notion of Peter Bernardone killing anyone settling poorly in his thoughts.

“Because I know who did,” Will answered. He bitterly elaborated, “But there’s no evidence, so the wrong man is in jail.”

Hannibal considered the situation, then commented, “Are you concerned more by the imprisonment of an innocent man or the freedom of the killer?”

Will’s eyes flashed back to Hannibal for a moment, looking at him sidelong even as his face remained turned toward the fire. It was a question he ought to have asked himself long before he arrived at this point.

“Both,” Will hedged.

“Equally?” Hannibal prompted, hearing the lack of force in Will’s response.

Will turned fully toward the fire, then got up and started walking the room as he had so often before.

“Does it matter?” he asked, running a finger along the back of an onyx figure shaped like a stag.

“It appears to,” Hannibal replied, eyes tracking Will though his body remained motionless. Conversationally, he observed, “You have a particular distaste for this killer.”

“Distaste for murderers is a prerequisite for my line of work,” Will cuttingly answered. He didn’t look at Hannibal.

Instead of taking the bait Will dangled in front of him, Hannibal offered it back: “Not for you. Maybe for a common field agent, but not for you, Will. You’re better than that.”

Will turned back to face the man sitting in repose.

“It would be convenient for you if I was,” Will spat, the familiar anger tensing the cords of muscle in his back and neck. He crossed his arms over his chest reflexively.

There was the smallest flare of Hannibal’s nostrils as he released a silent but too-hard breath. Momentarily, Will wondered if this was really why he’d come here-- to goad Hannibal into the kind of conflict they both were better suited at handling. If one of them died, at least the other’s problems would be lessened.

Will didn’t truly think this was the case, of course, but it would have been a relief if it was.

Hannibal tilted his head the other way and relaxed his shoulders. More softly than Will had expected, he explained, “My desires make no difference. No amount of whispering or molding could convince a moth to be reborn a butterfly, nor would I wish it to be.”

Will kept his gaze fixed on Hannibal’s as the man spoke, and he neither saw nor heard a lie in his voice. It was what made the room-- the man-- dangerous.

Seconds ticked by in silence, not particularly comfortable or uneasy. Will resumed the circle he was making around the room, picking up an antique medical textbook and flipping through its beige pages. He put it back in its place and went to the window to stare into the inky night.

Speaking into the darkness, he said evenly, “This killer won’t stop. He can’t. He has a taste for it, he’s good at it. He needs to possess to feel whole.”

Hannibal’s gaze dropped to the floor as he replied, “Death is a good deterrent for murder.”

Will nodded even though Hannibal was not looking at him now.
Eyes still on the floor, Hannibal questioned in a formal tone, “Have you come here to ask me for a favor?”

Will turned quickly, then froze. Hannibal glanced up at him from under a set brow, read the reaction as confirmation, and tightened his jaw. Will watched this happen, still surprised at Hannibal’s misinterpretation and edging toward becoming offended.

“*No,*” Will firmly, harshly denied the accusation. He saw a glint of defensiveness in Hannibal’s posture and understood: The question was meant to bruise. “You don’t believe that.”

The angles of Hannibal’s defined cheeks and jaw relaxed, and he had the good sense to look away from Will for a moment as the smallest act of contrition. Will’s indignation abated at Hannibal’s retreat. He wondered if Hannibal wanted to kill him-- if these venomous barbs were the closest they could come to that now.

Will returned to his seat and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together. It was objectively unwise to approach a killer one had so recently offended, but he was inexplicably sure the physical distance between them was impairing their understanding of one another. As powerful as words were for Hannibal, Will thought

proximity might be similarly moving for himself. He sought to use it as a tool, to dull his own sharp edges and avoid accidentally dealing a puncturing blow.

Hannibal leaned forward slightly in his own chair, beginning to mirror the body before him. Less guarded now, he asked, “Then why did you come here?”

Will met his stare and answered with a genuinely weary sigh, “I don’t know.”

The older man leaned forward further and put his own elbows on his legs. They were as close as they would dare come to one another, which was still a good distance apart.

“When you got in your car this evening, where did you intend to go?” Hannibal inquired, trying to prompt Will’s thinking as he had done countless times before.

“I was going to the man’s home. Clark Ingram’s apartment,” Will admitted, eyes glassier as he imagined himself going about his evening as it had been planned.

“Why?” Hannibal pushed further.

“I wasn’t going to kill him,” Will said, then went on after a pause, “Not tonight. I wanted to be sure.”

“You’ve followed him before?” Hannibal asked, already aware of the answer.

“Yes,” Will affirmed.

“Do you want to kill him?”

The question hung between them. Hannibal’s dark eyes searched Will’s, neither man allowing the other to look away.

“Yes,” Will breathed the word out in a whisper.

“What stopped you? Do you fear you’ll be damned for your sins, or do you worry Jack Crawford will sense his hound has gone rabid?” The dancing light in Hannibal’s eyes matched the provocation of his words.

“I haven’t considered the wrath of god-- or Jack,” Will snidely refuted Hannibal’s suggestion. He wasn’t lying. He wondered how much easier his life might have been if condemnation alone was enough to still his hand and his mind. It was not fear of any external being-- man or god-- that gave Will pause. Voice serious and barely above a whisper, Will questioned, “After your first kill, what did you see when you looked in the mirror?”

Hannibal didn’t flinch, didn’t pause, when he said in a clear, sure voice, “Myself.”

The certainty scraped over the wavering surface of Will’s thoughts; Hannibal’s serene confidence radiated warmth that reminded Will how achingly cold he had been. His fingers twitched with the need to trace the planes of the face he stared into, to know it was as real as Will himself was; not so long ago, he could have, and now he couldn’t-- not safely. He

wanted to perceive the honesty of the other man under the pressure and flesh of his own fingertips. He clasped his hands more tightly together as the impulse passed through him.

“Will,” Hannibal began again, his black and amber eyes lit from within. “You know where to find Clark Ingram. Who are you hoping to discover here?”

The truth came upon them so suddenly, Will didn’t have an opportunity to steel himself against it.

Swallowing hard, Will responded, “It’s 8:30.”

Hannibal leaned back, giving Will a path to escape. As before, he would not stop Will from leaving. With no small amount of contempt for himself, Will realized Hannibal had no need to stop Will from going when history had begun to teach him that he needed only to wait for Will to return at his own leisure.

Still, as Will walked through the patient’s exit, he heard the low, smooth voice behind him.

“Should I keep your appointment time open?”

Will huffed a sigh, so close to having fled without further entanglement. He didn’t stop walking as he called back a response: “I’ll see you next week.”

The stun of the cold night air gave him the sense of falling between parallel universes. He had exited to a world that was familiar but slightly wrong. It wouldn’t have especially surprised Will if Hannibal’s office was a gateway between dimensions, drawing him in only to deposit him in an alien land where everybody who populated his life knew only an alternate version of Will Graham-- a man who no longer existed, maybe never had.

Finally, at home, he let his dogs inundate him with their ecstatic form of love. Harley had started licking again-- a habit she hadn’t had since she was very new to their home-- but he didn’t censure her tonight. Max bulldozed Buster, but the small dog recovered and joined the mass of fur, and Will felt an affectionate laugh bubble in his throat at the oversized personalities of his family. Being recognized by the gang of canines was a better indicator that he was still alive and in the correct life than any other measure. He felt safe here, both in his body and in his mind.

Too anxious to sleep, Will collected some of his fishing gear in the corner of the living room. The final blast of snow had melted, and the weather would be warmer for the upcoming weekend. He would first try the stream close to his home; he’d take the dogs with him, and they’d make a mess of themselves in the muddy banks, then splay out on the grass to sleep in the sunshine. On Sunday, he could drive a few miles down the road to a spot he liked to visit each spring; it was rocky there, and fish often sought shelter under the overhangs. Remembering these places, Will craved the peace and solace of the water and could already feel the skillful, rhythmic motions that had been trained in his muscles since he was a child. It seemed he had always been a fisherman, always would be one.

This thought loitered in his mind as he was brushing his teeth. Will stared at himself in the mirror, and his mind loped ahead of him and wondered loudly if this was what he would still

see if he killed Clark Ingram; he leashed his mind as quickly as he could and didn't permit himself to think of Hannibal. Killing Clark Ingram had already taken shape in his mind, though, and he couldn't fully stop the tumbling thoughts. He had killed before; he was unchanged after killing Tobias Budge and Garrett Jacob Hobbs. Yet, this felt different-- it felt intentional. It felt like *hunting*, and Will Graham was not a hunter.

An idea transmitted with lightning speed between sectors of Will's mind that he tried so valiantly to keep independent of one another: Will was a fisherman; he was not made to stalk but to lure. He knew what bait would draw Clark Ingram.

The thoughts washed over him, soothing and eroding. He washed out his mouth and splashed cold water on his face. The sharpest voices in his mind-- the ones that howled when he saw sixteen graves-- were quieted, though, not by his force but by his recognition. It had always been inevitable.

Will dreamed of staring into a stream and seeing only his well-formed reflection.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

> Work is still utterly insane. Thank you for all for being patient and for leaving me such funny, interesting, and kind comments. You're great, and I appreciate having this outlet in the midst of craziness! ❤️ ❤️

Dirt, sweat, and blood formed a heavy paste on Will's shirt, making it cling and suffocate. He didn't touch anything in the pristine master bathroom even though his hands were mostly clean from where his gloves had protected them. He swayed lightly on his feet, tiredness and extinguished adrenaline making his head light.

Hannibal entered the space with a small, black leather bag. He was in bright white pajamas, hair tousled from sleep. Through the blissful fog of numbness, Will felt pangs of recognition. The other man had easily slipped from drowsy interest to doctorly command in the short time he'd been away. He arranged items from the bag on the countertop running the expanse of the wall: gauze, antiseptic, and a bottle of medication.

"I don't need--" Will started to protest the examination he perceived he would soon be receiving.

"You're covered in blood," Hannibal interrupted the anticipated words.

Will grimaced, then responded, "It's not mine."

An indecipherable spark flashed in Hannibal's eyes under the cool light of the bathroom.

"You're favoring your right side," Hannibal continued, already wearing Will's meager resolve down.

Will attempted a glare but could feel the vacancy in his expression. Hannibal stepped closer to him. It was the closest he'd been-- save passing through doorways-- since the night Will left. He beheld Will with softened features, his intensity stifled for the time being.

"Take off your shirt," he commanded gently, the clinical tone he had used earlier less apparent.

Had they been different people or had Will been in a more incendiary mood, he might have cracked a joke. The impulse passed as he unbuttoned the shirt, fingers becoming dirtied in the process. He slipped it carefully down his shoulders, though it still swiped a smear of blood on the counter in spite of his best effort. He winced with the movement, his ribs protesting just as they had when he had gotten into and out of his car. Without his earlier balm of adrenaline,

however, the pain was sharper. His skin was stained red where the shirt had pressed against him, and he couldn't tell where his injuries began and the blood of Clark Ingram ended.

Hannibal furrowed his brow at the sight and firmly said, "You need to shower first."

Will watched Hannibal leave without further admonishment.

He stripped the rest of the way mechanically and ran the water until it steamed. Hannibal was correct-- he was favoring his right side-- and he found that washing his hair and body with his left hand alone took much longer. As he cleaned his body, he didn't think of anything but the hot water on his skin and the blood and dirt swirling down the drain at his feet. The only moment that drew him briefly from his haze was when he washed his hair and smelled the familiar, spicy fragrance of the shampoo. It jarred him to have the concentrated scent lathered in his hair.

When he eventually turned the water off and grabbed the towel folded near the shower, he saw that his bloody, dirty clothing had disappeared, as had the dark streaks marring the countertop. He faintly smelled bleach. Hannibal had worked quietly, swiftly to dispose of the evidence Will had unceremoniously left in a heap. A pair of clean pants-- the same ones, Will realized, he'd worn previously when he had spent the night here long ago-- were folded neatly on the expanse of marbled stone between the two sinks of the double vanity. He slipped them on and toweled at his damp curls again, careful not to stretch too far.

Hannibal returned shortly after with a glass of water in hand. He looked Will up and down, then rested his eyes on the bruised midsection.

"Where are my clothes?" Will asked as he came to stand near the set of medical supplies.

"In the fireplace," Hannibal simply responded. He took two pills from the bottle and handed them to Will along with a glass of water, who accepted them without asking about their purpose. If Hannibal wanted to kill Will, he wouldn't poison him; there would be no satisfaction in that. Will gulped down the pills with a mouthful of water.

Medication administered, Hannibal began gingerly examining the damage to Will's body.

"Roll your left shoulder, please."

Will obliged.

"The right."

Will once again did as directed, though this time his eyes narrowed when he felt the sharp pain across his side.

"Strained intercostal muscles," Hannibal stated. "Bruised ribs. Ice them," he remarked. "Turn."

It was a testament to Will's exhaustion that he did not tell Hannibal he was not a dog and could be spoken to in more than fragments. He stood turned away from the other man for many seconds. He assumed the injury to his lower back looked as bad as it felt.

“How did this happen?” Hannibal asked as Will heard what sounded like the antiseptic being opened and poured onto something. He felt the cool gauze dabbing at his skin seconds later.

“A big rock,” Will responded. He could picture the angry marks across his back; it had stung even through his shirt. He felt Hannibal move the damp fabric over the injury.

The doctor cleaned the wound, then reached around Will’s body and expertly attached a larger bandage. He was cautious not to touch Will’s aching ribcage. By the time Will was released from Hannibal’s scrutiny, the throbbing in his side had ebbed, no doubt due to Hannibal’s proffered medication. Hannibal frowned, the expression dragging the corners of his eyes downward, and then disappeared without explanation. Will had drifted too far inward to care what, precisely, the other man was doing at the moment. He closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths, the spasm returning to his side when his lungs were at capacity. He was almost asleep on his feet when Hannibal’s voice broke through the still air.

“Will, stay with me.”

He blinked his eyes open slowly, then focused on the ice pack in Hannibal’s hand. He nodded, but asked with a hint of disagreeableness, “Where else would I be?”

Hannibal found something in his tone or words to be pleasing, and the frown loosened to neutrality on his face.

“I imagine your inner world is far richer than this one. It might tempt you to wander astray, away from where you find yourself now.”

To punctuate his slanted reprimand, Hannibal pressed the frigid ice pack to Will’s bruised side. Will winced and exhaled sharply but didn’t pull away from the cold.

“Hold this,” Hannibal directed. Will brought his own hand to the damp cloth, brushing against warm skin in the process.

While Hannibal collected his first aid supplies back into the black bag, Will gazed around the room. It was bare compared to most of the rooms in Hannibal’s home, but the exquisite stonework compensated for it. The one spot of color was a shelf with tropical plants. Hannibal caught Will eyeing them and looked at him expectantly.

“How do they live without sunlight?” Will asked, the question not one he particularly cared to have answered. It was a question meant to fill silence.

Hannibal returned to precisely packing away the first aid items and tidying the countertop as he responded, “Deprivation of that which we deem essential can fortify our ability to survive. The test is finding the line between strengthening and destroying oneself.”

His eyes on the simple lines of the waxy green plants, Will replied, “Weeds don’t need to be taught how to survive.”

For the first time, Hannibal smiled a half-grin, the line of his mouth crooked and his eyes both amused and fond. Will had seen this look many times before, but in the light of his

knowledge, it was one gesture among many whose authenticity had been called into question. Seeing it now, with no apparent reason to need to fool Will into believing in Hannibal's humanity, the expression was shuffled back into the realm of things Will knew to be real.

Returning to the present moment, Will felt more acutely the sting in his lower back from where Clark Ingram had pushed him hard into granite. He finally looked at himself in the vanity mirror: Will would be black and purple across his body tomorrow, but he had managed to avoid any noticeable damage to his face; he couldn't afford to show up to work with black eyes and busted lips. His unwavering gaze moved upward along the battered body in the mirror until his eyes met those of his reflection.

Hannibal crossed the space behind Will, black bag in hand. He paused for a moment to observe Will's expression in the mirror. Standing behind Will, Hannibal could have been his shadow, changing shape in the light but fixed to a single point. The bruised skin of Will's abdomen compared to the crisp white of Hannibal's pajama top, however, caused Will to wonder if he had been mistaken-- if he was the shadow dancing through Hannibal's home in the small hours of the morning. Yet, when Will looked again at their twin reflections, the image in the mirror was only that of a pair of tired men bathed in light.

A hand came to rest tentatively on his shoulder, drawing his gaze to Hannibal's reflected eyes. The touch was safe, uncomplicated, but the feeling of skin on skin evoked a flush of warmth that ran from the point of contact to his chest; it was a comforting sensation, traveling along well-worn pathways which had fallen into disuse over the previous weeks. Will felt in his stomach how easy it was to believe they had returned to their previous trajectory; in that timeline, perhaps they had gotten wrapped up in conversation and were going to bed late. Will could have hurt his ribs in any number of ways-- a fall, a struggle in the field-- and Hannibal was a former surgeon who now only used his considerable skills to heal the minor injuries of the man whose body he was well-acquainted with. Will couldn't gather the energy to scold his mind and rail against the lies, but he also didn't allow his body the comfort of taking a step back to rest his spine along Hannibal's arm.

He remained motionless in the space between lies and truths.

"You should rest," a voice said from behind him. Hannibal dropped his hand from Will's shoulder and exited the small room.

Will followed and was led to the same guest room he had stayed in the night his encephalitis was detected. The promise of sleep was too tantalizing to refuse a moment longer, so without flipping on the light, he walked in a daze to the bed and unceremoniously moved the throw pillow out of the way. He took another long sip of the water glass he'd carried from the bathroom and was nestled fully between the sheets before Hannibal clicked the door shut.

Between the pain medication and his tiredness, he enjoyed a deep, black sleep.

Around 6, Will began to slowly wake. He felt as though he could sleep for hours still, but his classes couldn't be canceled-- not today. In the gray light that escaped around the edges of the heavy curtains, Will could see the dark spans of bruises across his abdomen. He sat up slowly, rolling on his left side to protect his injured right ribs.

From the staircase, he could hear the sounds of Hannibal making coffee in the kitchen. He was tempted to sneak out and avoid the circular, philosophical exchange he anticipated, but disappearing after another late night visit seemed just rude enough that it might genuinely irritate the other man. Aside from that, Will thought going to class in only a pair of pajama bottoms might draw the wrong sort of attention.

He stood in the entryway suddenly feeling rather naked. Hannibal looked up under his brow and acknowledged Will by sliding a cup of coffee across the island. He was still in his white pajamas, and his eyes were shadowy; the untouchable man did, in fact, look weary now. Will took a slow sip of coffee, the scent of smoke and caramel wafting up to his nose.

“I didn’t mean to come here last night,” Will said into his coffee, his elbows clenched close to his sides.

The older man was somewhere deep within his own thoughts, though, and his eyes settled on Will’s face.

“And yet, you are here,” Hannibal observed dispassionately. His voice went quiet when he said, “Tell me what happened.”

Will stared into the chocolate-colored liquid in his cup. In the flashes of light on the surface, he imagined he might see the events of the previous evening unfolding before his eyes. That wish not coming to fruition, he felt his mind fall backward in time as he remained rooted to his spot in the kitchen.

“I killed Clark Ingram.”

Nothing more needed to be said, but Hannibal wouldn’t allow such simplification.

A beat of silence passed between them. Will sensed Hannibal reconstructing the scene within his own mind.

Hannibal broke the quiet, asking, “At his home?”

“No,” Will replied, then clarified hesitantly, “A cemetery.”

“Awfully considerate of you.”

Will didn’t give Hannibal the benefit of a smile.

Instead, Will shook his head and described further, “Could walk there from his house. It’s where two of his victims are buried.”

Hannibal added this new layer of information to his mental image, then commented, “No need to enter the dragon’s lair when he is so keen to wander into the night. Did you follow him?”

Will lacked any desire to explain to the other man that he wasn’t like him-- he wasn’t a hunter. He had found the right lure and put himself in an exact spot at an exact time. Will instead said, “I waited for him by one of the graves.”

It was possible Hannibal understood the method of his actions without explanation-- Will wouldn't be especially surprised if the man's preternatural insight gifted him with this knowledge. Still, he would never know precisely how it looked, how it felt. Only Will knew that.

He remembered it with pristine, crystal clarity and could replay it second by second:

From behind an old-growth tree cast in shadows, Will watched Clark Ingram, clad in his cheap brown suit, stop at a large headstone with two names engraved. They looked worn, and Will knew by Clark's relaxed posture and hung head that he was only standing there because it provided an advantageous view of the girl he'd truly come to visit: Michelle Goffe, supposedly Peter Bernardone's ninth victim. Clark played the grieving son of whatever unfortunate couple was buried at the marble monument in front of him while he looked forward to his true destination.

They stood that way-- Clark watching the grave of Michelle Goffe and Will watching Clark Ingram-- for many motionless minutes.

Clark eventually glanced around casually and strolled toward Michelle's headstone. He looked at the few he passed on his way, although Will could tell he didn't see anything but rocks etched with meaningless glyphs. When he arrived at Michelle's grave, he walked around the still-fresh dirt. He crouched next to the stone and pressed his fingertips where the murdered girl's name was carved.

Staring at the scene unfolding in front of him, Will could almost feel the cold stone under his own fingertips. Michelle's name was forced more deeply into the granite under the pressure of his hands, and in this way, the girl was once more crushed. She might not be in the grave he chose for her, but Clark Ingram could touch her whenever he pleased now. There was a new thrill to this public display of possession. It wasn't necessarily as alluring as having a field of death to lord over, but it was enough for tonight.

Will could understand Clark Ingram. It was impossible not to. Comprehending the workings of Clark Ingram's mind had more in common with empathizing with a shark than a normal human being. Will thought with distant, dark amusement that he preferred sharks-- at least they were right to think of themselves as apex predators. Clark Ingram, meanwhile, was terribly mistaken. He preyed on women he manipulated with his public servant costuming. Clark had chosen this for himself, and Will felt no tugs of doubt or guilt when he began walking toward the oblivious man.

It wasn't dissimilar to how he felt when he decided to kill Tobias Budge: Quiet. Powerful. In his mind, only his own, sure thoughts reverberated through the chambers.

Clark was too fully absorbed in reclaiming Michelle Goffe to notice Will until he was almost at the foot of her grave. Ingram turned to Will and looked him quickly up and down. His face melted from blank indifference to an imitation of dignified grief tinged with the annoyance of being interrupted.

"Did you know Michelle?" Clark asked.

Will continued staring without answering. He wasn't inclined to participate in this charade of civility.

Clark's eyes squinted, and he let a purposefully fake smile lift the corners of his mouth.

"Can I *help* you?" he questioned, the true message-- *Leave*-- clear in his tone and plastic expression.

"Peter Bernardone didn't kill her," Will flatly replied, prompting Clark to quickly stand and take a step forward.

"Excuse me?" Clark barked, his eyes cold in spite of the fire rising in his voice.

He received no response. Will stood still, silent, and empty. He allowed Clark Ingram to see whatever he wanted to see in that moment-- a trick Will had exercised with Jack too frequently lately-- and waited for the man's response. Predictably, Ingram saw an idle threat to be dealt with swiftly and brutally.

However, Clark Ingram was not a fighter. He had chosen women he could overpower, and he went straight for the kill. He surprised them by releasing his facade of humanity and strangling them while the shards clattered at their feet. When he threw the first punch, he telegraphed it with the tilt of his shoulders and aimed it squarely at Will's face. It was a haymaker that didn't have the opportunity to land as Will ducked and leaned out.

Because of the weight Clark put into the strike, he careened forward unsteadily when his punch failed to meet flesh. He stumbled almost into Will's arms, his torso open for a much more expert punch to the gut. Clark made a sick, wheezing sound when the knuckles dug into his stomach, then another when the same fist landed a blow to his kidney. With a grunt, Clark rammed forward, knocking them both to the ground, him halfway on top of Will.

They were on the overturned dirt of Michelle Goffe's grave, and Will could feel it settling into his hair and clothing underneath him. Clark mirrored Will's punches, quickly learning from his own prior mistakes. Will drove a hand into his throat, and while Clark rolled back enough to avoid true damage, the shock gave Will enough time to push away and get to his knees. Clark rushed him again, this time pushing him hard against the headstone; Will felt the granite edge in his lower back and let a pained breath escape his lips. Emboldened by the noise, Clark tried attacking the dark-haired man's midsection again with a steadier hand, but Will caught the lowering fist in his grip. In response, Clark twisted and drove his elbow into Will's ribcage, eliciting another gasping breath.

This clumsy struggle was doing more damage than Will would have liked, and while he had managed to keep Clark from striking his face, he did not enjoy the idea of broken bones.

Using the headstone as leverage, Will launched upward with a great push, closing the distance enough between them that Clark couldn't throw another exaggerated punch. Will brought his hand to Clark's ear, popping it hard. The feeling and sound would be jarring, and sure enough, Clark reacted by recoiling instinctively. Will stood straight, landed a better punch to his exposed throat, and then reached for Clark's lapel before he could recover. He yanked Clark downward and brought a knee to his nose; the man didn't fully realize what

was happening to him yet. The tides had turned so fully against him in seconds-- at least, that was what Clark Ingram would see. He would never know how much Will Graham let him do so that he could claim every millisecond of Clark Ingram's death. Clark Ingram was a gift-- one that may never come again.

Ingram yelped and dropped to his knees in the dirt. He was gasping for breath and bleeding from the face now. Will wasted no time in pushing Clark Ingram fully to the ground, a reversal of their previous position. Clark struggled feebly but lacked the coordination and time to form a counterattack. Instead, he twisted as Will put one knee on either side of his torso, and he struck at Will's battered ribs to try to shake the man off of him. This compelled Will to bring a fist firmly down into Clark Ingram's jaw. The same fist lifted and dropped in rapid succession, the rising and lowering of tides over Clark Ingram. When a choke escaped Clark as the blood from his broken nose poured down his throat, Will decided then was the time to end Clark Ingram's miserable life. There was nothing left but death-- no more following, no more waiting, no more fighting.

Two gloved hands encircled Clark Ingram's throat and tightened. Will could feel the desperate, uncoordinated movements as Ingram feebly tried to dodge the inevitable, yet as he stared into Ingram's blood-black face in the moonlight, Will knew his work was righteous.

Clark's struggling intensified with his hands grasping at Will's rigid arms, then abated as his body went limp. Will maintained his position for many moments longer, wanting to be certain he had finished what he set out to do. When he was sure Clark Ingram was dead, Will stood and stared down at the slits of his blank eyes and stillness of his chest. He was painted in red and black, and his flesh was shaped by the dual forces of agony and violence. He looked the way he should have looked every day of his life: Grotesque, animal, brutal, and weak. Perhaps that was why the world was no worse a place, and Will was still alone in his mind.

Will glanced around to ensure he was still alone in the old, tree-shrouded cemetery at midnight on a Sunday. Seeing nobody, he took off his coat, cast it to the ground behind the headstone, and then set about his task. The previous day, he had visited the cemetery in the early evening to scope out where the two girls Ingram would undoubtedly visit were laid to rest; he also planted a sturdy hand trowel in the overgrown weeds at the base of the tree where he earlier stood. It was easy to carry in a messenger bag, and because the cemetery had little traffic, it was not difficult to drop it in place.

Retrieving the trowel, Will began the task of digging into the loosened dirt of Michelle Goffe's fresh grave.

It took Will over an hour and a half to dig deep enough to drag Clark Ingram's body into the black hole, getting a great deal more blood on his clothing in the process. Refilling the grave was far easier than digging it, but he had to be careful to leave the area as undisturbed as possible. The forecast called for rain tomorrow, which would help and was one of the reasons why tonight had to be the night. Still, Will didn't want to hinge his safety on the weather.

Satisfied that he had restored the scene, he put his coat back on over his heavily soiled clothing and, when he reached his vehicle, wrapped the trowel in a tarp and tucked it in the corner of his trunk near his roadside toolbox. Sitting in the driver's seat, he was acutely

aware of how filthy he was and how far away from home. With these feelings came a wave of loneliness greater than any he had felt in a very long time-- probably since his first, horrific year of college. The black of night stretched on around him in every direction, and the same blackness colored him now, as well, as the blood and dirt muddled on the shirt under his coat. He glanced at his face in the mirror briefly and saw smudges of dirt. He snatched a packet of wet wipes, a remnant of some fast food meal, from the glovebox and wiped his face quickly. Flooded with both serenity and melancholy, Will blankly thought it might not be so unreasonable to drive twenty minutes to be nearer to a person-- the only person-- who would see him as he was that night and understand it without explanation. It sounded preferable to driving an hour in the suffocating dark, covered in dirt and blood, and then trying to shield his dogs from the reality of who he was.

Now, in the light of day, Will wasn't sure what needed to be said and what didn't.

"I approached him. He tried to hit me. We struggled. I killed him," Will described as succinctly as possible.

Hannibal watched his face as he thought and as he spoke, divining some details simply from Will's reactions and the state he was in when he arrived at Hannibal's home in the middle of the night-- again.

"How did you kill him?" Hannibal inquired, hands gripping the counter instead of his mug.

Although he still felt exposed-- which may well have been part of Hannibal's strategy to extract the truth from him-- Will was not uneasy answering these questions. He had awoken to find no new blossoms of doubt and regret.

Will decided to tell the truth and end the conversation as painlessly as possible in that way.

"I strangled him," Will answered directly.

Hannibal's eyes glittered in the early morning light as he leaned his head a bit to the side and let his mouth faintly open.

"With what?" the older man asked.

Will didn't miss a beat as he responded, "My hands."

Hannibal smiled with his eyes, another familiar expression that carried with it associations too strong to keep at bay.

"How did you feel?" Hannibal inquired, the question sounding curious on his lips instead of rote. It still bothered Will.

Will went to the chair in the corner of the room and sat on the edge, his elbows on his knees and the mug held between his hands. He looked up from under his eyelashes at the man watching him intently.

“What’s your real question?” Will demanded, voice even.

No reaction registered on Hannibal’s face other than a tiny upward quirk at the corner of his mouth.

Eyes darkening as he tipped his head lower, Hannibal asked, “Did you enjoy killing Clark Ingram?”

Will nodded once, a small movement. Then, voice dropping, he said, “But I don’t have to kill. Do you?”

Will could see the question was unexpected by how Hannibal blinked a few times and cast his gaze down at his mug for just a second. The microexpressions he exercised masterful control over were less concealed in the present moment. Never truly shaken, Hannibal’s gaze met Will’s again.

“Choices are not compulsions.” Hannibal let the words drift in Will’s mind, let him break them apart and piece them back together. Then, his tone still serious but edged with something colder, he asked, “Would you have me swear myself to a life of polite indifference? Is that the price?”

A humorless laugh exhaled through Will’s mouth, but he maintained eye contact. Will lifted his chin and cocked his head to the side, a challenging pose. He sat back into the chair and put his arms on the rests, his body a portrait of relaxation in spite of his intense eyes.

He was beginning to understand.

“What if I did? What if Freddie Lounds was the last?” His voice was wry and intentionally provocative. He knew he was bordering on toying with an unchained predator, but the opportunity beckoned him.

Hannibal’s eyes flickered over his body, trying to read the truth in his words. Will remained loose and casual in the corner chair. The fair-haired man didn’t look angry, as Will had expected, but he was agonizingly serious.

“If I promised this, it would one day become a lie. I’d rather not lie to you, Will,” Hannibal spoke carefully, watching Will for any sign of response. None was provided. He continued, “Although negotiation may be reasonable.”

Silence filled the room, and Will delighted in its discomfort. He believed the other man’s answer. Will sensed his mental construct of Hannibal had been missing a piece of indeterminate size and shape, but the gap was closing. Will had mistakenly believed he was at a disadvantage in their relationship-- he had been lied to, he lacked knowledge of the other man, he was the one who sought out Hannibal twice in the middle of the night. Yet, in this moment, he held the truth in his hands and could feel the weight of it. Will had the only power that mattered: He could walk away. Hannibal didn’t appear to have that luxury at the moment. He had stayed, routine unchanged, until Will reentered his life; he was willing to sacrifice that which must have defined great swathes of his existence in exchange for the

presence of another. He was the one who had laid himself bare and waited for reward or punishment. Now, he was waiting again for Will's judgment.

Yes, this was a terribly risky game-- holding a tiger by the leash. Maybe it wasn't as dangerous if the man holding the tiger was a shadow.

"No negotiation, no requests." Again, Hannibal paused, his expectations defied. Will didn't give him a chance to push the conversation further. Will flatly stated, "I have class today."

To punctuate his point, Will stood up and took his empty mug to the sink. He could feel eyes on him, burning into his back. When Will looked back at the other man, Hannibal's jaw was tight, but the subtle crow's feet around his eyes intimated his keen interest in the unfolding events.

In the golden light of the early-morning kitchen, they read one another's faces, amusement meeting defiance, ire meeting acceptance.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

> A little bit of a lighter chapter this time, but we're humming along S2 now. Thank you all for continuing to read and for bearing with me through the craziness of the last few weeks (and the insanity this one promises). ❤️ ❤️

For the remainder of their brief morning together, Hannibal spoke little but observed Will hawkishly. His face fell into disapproving blankness when Will declined breakfast; it glowed in poorly-concealed satisfaction when Will emerged wearing the clothing Hannibal lent him for his morning classes; when Will left-- his parting words a promise that he would return the clothing unscathed-- Hannibal's alert eyes held the muted wonder of a man who had just observed a delightfully well-executed magic trick. With a final glance backward as he left, Will pondered if time had ceased to operate correctly for Hannibal just as it had for him.

The drive to work was an exercise in restoration. There was a dirty trowel hidden away in his trunk, and he was cloaked in the scents and textures of another. Will could run his hands through his hair and catch a waft of the scent of Hannibal's soap from the night before; it smelled of cedar and spices as opposed to the clean mint that Will was accustomed to. He wasn't quite sure what cardamom smelled like, but it sounded like the kind of spice Hannibal would choose-- just uncommon enough to be commented on, but not odd enough to be remarkable. The clothing was heavier than his own and a bit too loose on his frame, though Hannibal had shown restraint in its selection, certainly in part because of Will watching him doubtfully as he rifled through his closet. Left to his own devices, the bespoke man would have probably chosen something plaid or paisley or with a *sheen*; instead, he produced tan slacks, a dark red button-down, and a black winter coat. The apparel was decidedly of a better quality and higher price point than anything Will would buy, but it wasn't gaudy or eye-catching. It still felt foreign on his skin, though, and it still smelled distinctly of the other man's home.

He remembered the night Hannibal had spent in Wolf Trap, wearing Will's sleeping clothes. It was hard not to remember that night when its reflection seemed to be playing out in Will's present life. The memory was too warm for a morning such as this.

On his way to Quantico, Will detoured to drive by the cemetery. It was drizzling rain, but he had no intention of exiting his vehicle anyway. He only wanted to catch a glimpse of the landscape to see if any unwanted attention had been drawn there. Passing by the green field speckled with gray tombstones, there was not a soul in sight. Clark Ingram still lay under many feet of dirt, undetected and unmissed. The idea of Clark melting into the soil in another's grave was as satisfying in the daylight as it had been under the clouded night sky.

As he had often felt before, Will was caught between two worlds. He was unencumbered by the guilt he should have felt yet wary of this exact feeling. He wore another man's clothing because his own had been burned in a fire to destroy evidence of a murder, and his only complaint was that it was uncomfortable and evoked memories he wasn't entirely ready to relegate to the past just yet. It should worry him how devoid of remorse-- or even shame-- he was. It should.

In his classroom, the students noticed no difference in their professor. There *was* no difference in him. He huffed at a young man who was late and shot a look of disdain at a young woman who suggested the murderer in the case study they were examining had sexualized his victims-- she had clearly not completed the assigned reading-- but otherwise talked at the students for a solid 90 minutes. It was a standard day in Graham's classroom.

Will wasn't certain if he was particularly adept at playing the role he had created for himself or if he should worry about the future of the FBI.

Classes through, Will organized papers on his desk and sat down to finish proofreading the midterm. Again, he was shaken by the unsettling awareness of the utter silence within the walls of his mind. Clark Ingram's ghost was nowhere to be found, and his psyche had failed to penetrate Will's fortified barriers. There were clinical terms used to describe people who could kill and then go on to complete mundane tasks, blending seamlessly into ordinary life. He had heard some of those terms applied to him by Freddie Lounds and the more unscrupulous psychiatrists who wrote about him, but they sounded like insults. They still did. Will Graham was not a psychopath, nor was Hannibal Lecter. He wasn't sure what they were; perhaps it didn't have a name yet.

The exiting students left the classroom door open to the thrum of noise in the hallway, but it still surprised Will when he heard his name called out by a friendly voice.

"Will Graham, my favorite professor," Beverly Katz brightly greeted. "Can't get away from me that easily," she added with a smile as she made her way toward the man hunched over his desk.

In spite of the darker ideas inking the edges of his thoughts, he gave a small grin back. The woman's energy and forthrightness exuded from her with each sure step, her head held high and her gait smooth. Her certainty in her knowledge of herself proved strangely comforting to Will each time they interacted; if he looked at their friendship sideways and with squinted eyes, it reminded him a bit of Hannibal.

"I'll try harder next time," Will answered, but he felt the corners of his eyes crinkle as he said the words.

"Where have you been hiding?" she asked, sitting in the chair across from him.

He glanced around the room and raised his eyebrows.

"Exciting," she sarcastically remarked. "Usually, when a man pulls a woman out of a horse with a lady, he has the decency to call afterward."

“Learn that in finishing school?” Will questioned in a sardonic tone.

“Emily Post, under ‘Placenta’ if I recall,” Beverly grinned.

A vision of a woman wrapped in gauzy pink tissue flickered in Will’s mind, then vanished.

“This is nice and...institutional,” Beverly observed, craning her head to scan her eyes over the muted colors of the classroom. “Want to get lunch?”

Will quirked an eyebrow at the speed with which she changed topics, then leaned back in his chair, his fingers curling on the arms of it.

“Nothing like placenta to stimulate the appetite,” Will wryly replied.

“If you don’t eat now, you won’t. Jack’s gonna call you to a crime scene.”

He crossed his arms and sighed, leaning his head back. He waited to hear the name Clark Ingram.

“A truck driver was torn apart, maybe by animals, maybe not,” Beverly explained.

Will dropped his head back down and looked at her with widened eyes, his momentary worry fading and being replaced by curiosity.

“If you know this, why aren’t you at the scene?” Will inquired, his mind generating a dozen scenarios that could result in a truck driver being ripped apart.

“Jack doesn’t have what I’d call an indoor voice. Local PD called and asked him to check it out, decide if it’s their jurisdiction or BAU,” Beverly relayed the earlier events nonchalantly--another day, another case. “So, lunch?”

Will nodded and grabbed his-- Hannibal’s-- coat. He started toward the door, but Beverly lagged behind.

“Woah,” the woman humorously commented, slowing his pace. “Gonna pretend like nothing’s different?”

The dark-haired man turned and looked at Beverly quizzically.

“Did...you get a haircut?” he offered lamely, knowing precisely what she meant. His poorly-pretended innocence earned him an incredulous look.

Beverly walked past him out the door, and Will followed a step behind. As they strolled down the hallway at a slower pace than Will would have preferred, Beverly began speaking again.

“I watched your dogs. I’m not saying I *deserve* anything, but I am invested in your wellbeing now,” Beverly jokingly said, the smile in her voice disarming Will. She was good at that--finding the line between pushing and shoving.

“What makes you think these aren’t my clothes?” Will asked, wanting to hear how she immediately pegged the clothing as borrowed when nobody else had raised an eyebrow. He’d even seen Price this morning when he got coffee but received little more than a drowsy nod.

Beverly exhaled a dry laugh, suggesting it was painfully obvious.

“Nobody buys clothing like that in the wrong size,” Beverly responded. “I’ve never seen you in any of this--” she waved her hand up and down his body “-- yet there are signs of wear.”

Will imagined Hannibal would be very insulted to hear that observation.

They walked a few yards in silence, then Beverly added good-naturedly, “Do you even know what my job is, Graham?”

Will chuckled once, conceding that it was a fair point.

“They look like nice clothes…expensive clothes…” she trailed off.

“The answer to your question is yes. And no,” Will firmly stated, eyes forward. One of his students halfway down the hallway ducked his head and gave the professor an awkward wave.

“How many more dogsitting tours do I have to do to get better details?” she questioned in an airy tone.

Will felt a sting of irritation but reminded himself that, as far as Beverly Katz was concerned, he was a mostly average guy who had a semi-mysterious relationship and a wholly mysterious break-up. This was what normal *friends* did-- not trade metaphysical barbs by the fireplace.

“One detail. Then, this discussion is over,” he offered as gamely as he could.

A full minute passed in silence as they reached the doors of the dining hall. Will cringed inwardly to think of the questions running through Beverly’s mind. Just before they entered, she made her choice.

“What happened to your clothes?”

Unable to stop himself from goading Beverly just a bit in spite of the fact it would only encourage her growing curiosity, Will quickly answered, “They were ruined.”

Beverly’s eyes stretched wide and her mouth opened slightly.

Will proceeded toward the cafe kiosk, Beverly on his heels as she whispered loudly between laughs, “What? How? Will!”

“Sandwich or lunch plate?” he asked coolly.

“Sandwich,” Beverly replied, gracefully accepting that she had chosen the wrong question.

They found a seat near a large window and unwrapped their cold lunches, phones left facing upward on the table awaiting Jack's summons.

"It's unfair you know so much about my...social life...when I don't know anything about yours," Will commented, then took a bite. It seemed like the sort of question he ought to pose, and he would do almost anything at that point to redirect the conversation from his life to hers.

"Last Saturday, I went on a date with a guy named Wes who tried to grope me at a minor league baseball game. Not as interesting a story," Beverly shrugged.

Will coughed once, a masked laugh as he tried to chew at the same time.

"How'd you react?" Will asked, struggling to imagine anyone laying a hand on Beverly Katz.

"Elbowed him, then he threw up a hotdog in front of a group of little leaguers," she explained flatly. *That* Will could imagine.

Their sunny moment was interrupted by Beverly's phone buzzing and Jack's name lighting up the screen.

"Price made Jack's ringtone the Imperial Death March," Beverly commented as she picked up. "Hello?"

She was silent for a few minutes as Jack spoke loudly. Will picked up a few key terms-- north, truck stop, animals, shredded-- and surmised they would soon be headed to a bloody scene.

"Will's with me. I'll tell him," Beverly said into the device. "Leaving now."

She ended the call and glanced at Will, who was already grabbing the coat off the back of his chair.

"He's sending us the address," she told him, and Will nodded and exhaled a hard, tired breath. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to be on his porch with his gang of dogs surrounding him and the afternoon sunshine warming his face and their fur.

Instead, at a rest stop an hour away in a valley where a new snow had recently fallen, Will found himself staring at the disassembled body of what once was a fairly stout trucker. The man's head hung precariously, his throat ripped open and his intestines streaming out of his torn gut onto the white ground. The nearly-decapitated man was mostly frozen from the cold, as were the assorted pieces of viscera lying within a fifty-foot radius of the truck.

Will absorbed the landscape and the scene, trying to picture a creature stalking the man and catching him unaware. The image wasn't forthcoming, though, and he couldn't quite decipher why. He circled the scene until he came to the side of Jack Crawford. Beyond the stained snow, the ground was an even white, still as a lake on a windless day.

"Are you sure this was an animal? There aren't any tracks," Will pointed out.

Zeller answered the question, though Will had not been speaking to him.

“The bite almost severed his head. Look--” Zeller stepped closer to the man and pointed a gloved finger perilously close to the exposed throat-- “carotid, jugular, even the esophagus is torn.”

Piping up from somewhere on the other side of the truck, Price’s higher voice rung out, “The mutilation was done by large, non-retractable claws. We’re looking at a bear or a wolf.”

“Not unusual for this region,” Zeller added.

Beverly hummed thoughtfully, then suggested, “Maybe the cold affected its food supply, drove it closer to populated areas.”

“It’s sure not afraid of humans anymore,” Jack commented in reply.

Will eyed the scene again and tried once more to conjure a vision of the previous night, a hulking bear or silver-maned wolf prowling closer to the trucker. He couldn’t see it.

“Wolves and bears don’t eat where they kill. They would’ve dragged him off,” Will argued. “He was ravaged but not consumed. I don’t think this is an animal.”

Zeller rolled his eyes as he turned to continue his work, but unable to accept the alternative, he tossed over his shoulder, “What if it was rabid?”

Beverly spoke before Will had a chance, “Rabid animals aren’t as stealthy as healthy animals, not once they become symptomatic. It would have been harder for it to surprise him.”

“This isn’t an isolated case, either,” Price remarked, drawing raised eyebrows. “Oh, I mean, this is the only *human* murder, but livestock in the area have been found mutilated without any missing...pieces.”

Jack looked back and forth between Beverly, Price, and Will. Chin raised and eyes narrowed in thought, Jack offered, “Could be a trained animal. I can’t think of a better murder weapon.”

“The livestock mutilations were practice?” Will questioned, his quick mind grasping at connections.

“Possibly. Honing skills and channeling instincts but also desensitizing it to more urban environments.”

Will didn’t disagree, the idea seeming more plausible than the thought that a wild animal would do this of its own volition and then walk away without a well-earned meal. Still, there was no spark of recognition when he considered the theory. In his mind, the trucker was poised to enter the cab, the blackness behind him holding an as-yet unidentified monster.

Theories posited and evidence temporarily exhausted, Will was dismissed from the scene with a cursory “I’ll be in touch soon” from Jack.

In the late afternoon, Will finally arrived home. He hadn't been gone for a full twenty-four hours, but it wasn't far enough off that he could avoid feeling guilty for leaving his gang cooped up. When he opened the door, Winston, Max, and Jack tore off into the yard, leaving the smaller dogs trailing behind them. Will stood among the dashing canines and let the last rays of mid-March sun shine down on them. It was an abridged version of the moment he had earlier longed for, but he couldn't find room for complaint. In this space, he had all that he needed in the world: his home, his dogs, and a stream nearby.

It was a world worth keeping, yet he had risked it to kill Clark Ingram.

The first pang of shame twisted his stomach as he watched his family tackle and dive over one another, returning occasionally to Will's side to bump against his leg playfully or sniff at his pant leg, investigating the familiar scent emanating from the wrong person. Will made himself move to avoid falling into the trap he was setting; mentally throwing himself onto the spikes at the bottom of the pit would not change anything in the physical world.

The dogs followed Will around the perimeter of the field and through a sparse patch of woods. He tried tossing a stick for them, but his ribs protested as soon as he raised his arm behind his head. When they reached a familiar path, Max sprung ahead and then circled back. They had walked this trail together hundreds of times before, yet the dog never quite stopped believing that his family might disappear if he didn't return for them. Will understood that fear well.

At home by the fire that night, the dogs collapsed into heaps cuddled near one another. Winston eyed the bed mischievously. Will was fairly certain he slept there the previous night in his human's absence, but the dog didn't make the leap. Will's body was aching still from the struggle with Clark Ingram, and he had not had enough sleep the previous night. Lying in his own bed, surrounded by the huffing sound of his dogs' breathing, Will relaxed into the mattress and drifted off easily.

Tuesday was, in the life of Will Graham, an uneventful day. Jack and Beverly visited the natural history museum to gain some insight on bite patterns, and Will was left alone to teach with the assurance that the team would meet the next day at the latest to discuss lab findings. He relished a day of quiet-- a day of nothingness that illuminated exactly how strange his world had become in recent months. At home, he pushed those thoughts away and went fishing instead. He didn't think of Clark Ingram.

Wednesday morning, after his classes, Will entered the lab to find Jack, Price, Zeller, and Beverly standing by a table with two animal skulls. Their eager faces suggested there might be a good reason Will was unable to reconstruct the crime scene in his mind.

"We took the bite radius from wounds on the trucker and a sheep and compared them to members of the genera *Ursus* and *Canis*. Even the largest species of wolf-- our dire wolf friend here-- is itty bitty by comparison," Price explained, petting the dire wolf skull.

"Meet the cave bear," Zeller proudly stated, grasping the larger skull. "He had the closest comparative bite radius. But don't convict him just yet."

Jack sighed, tired of the two-man routine, and crossed his arms.

“And why is that?” he asked dryly.

“Because the cave bear has been extinct for twenty-eight thousand years,” Beverly answered on Price and Zeller’s behalf. “And even if we somehow have stumbled on a natural miracle, cave bears were herbivores and lacked the bite force necessary to do the kind of damage we saw.”

Intrigued, Jack put his hands on his hips and cocked his head to eye the skulls, then the lab team. He looked at both sets with equal scrutiny. Furrowing his brow, he inquired, “What does have enough force?”

“Pneumatics, pull-ratchets-- machinery,” Zeller replied.

Will and Jack looked at each other, both imagining a man outfitted as a beast.

“Looks like we need a profiler after all,” Jack said pointedly.

Although Will heard him, he did not respond. The previously sepia-toned, frozen scene in Will’s mind came to life in vibrant hues as a man mechanically transformed walked out of the shadows behind the trucker. This animal had no fear of humans because he had once been one.

It was this image that Will carried with him into the evening’s meeting with Hannibal.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all for your comments and for hanging in with me as my pace has slowed to 1-2 posts per week. ❤️ ❤️ I appreciate you all! The poem quoted here is "The Blue House" by Tomas Tranströmer. It's worth a read if you want to get in your feels 😉

In spite of the lingering cold, spring rendered the sky over Baltimore a dark gray by the time Will arrived for his meeting. He pulled his coat closer to him as he trudged toward the looming, stately building that housed Hannibal's office. He didn't notice the striking redhead standing by the entrance gate until he was almost upon her, but when he did look up, her red-rimmed, yet still mischievous, eyes were set on him. He gave her a quick glance and head nod and continued past her until he heard her voice behind him.

"You're a patient of Dr. Lecter's?"

Will glanced back, taking a full look at her, noticing her cream-white skin set against the deep auburn of her long, loose hair. She reminded him of Alana a bit, though airier and lacking Alana's edge of seriousness.

"I think I was," Will answered, half-turning.

"Close enough. Patient-to-patient, what do you think of Dr. Lecter's therapy?" she asked, her voice suggesting she already had good reason to doubt Hannibal's ethics without any input from a man on the sidewalk.

"Looking for a character reference?" Will replied with his own question, finding the idea funnier than it ought to be.

"Something like that," the woman responded, tilting her head in an amused but not unfriendly smirk.

There were no words that could appropriately describe Hannibal to a passing stranger, and it felt dangerous to try. Will wanted his words to be measured and selected carefully from the stream of thoughts that rushed around him at the mention of the man.

He put his hands in his pockets and relaxed his shoulders but still didn't turn toward the woman. To a point somewhere in front of him in the empty air, he said, "He'll offer you what he deems essential to uncovering who you are. You can accept it or reject it."

Without looking at her directly, he could sense the lovely woman's smile fade into a close-lipped, small frown.

“I’ve been to psychiatrists before. Never had to reject one,” she mused, watching Will with bright, keen eyes.

He gave a dry laugh and answered, “Hannibal’s not like other therapists.”

The woman looked Will up and down appraisingly, then intoned in a too-casual voice, “Hannibal.” Will looked at her fully then, registering that she had noted the familiarity inherent in using the doctor’s first name so easily. The woman continued, “Hannibal, Margot, and....?”

“Will,” he supplied.

“Will,” she repeated. “Three portraits of sanity.”

He couldn’t help but smile at the unbearably astute summation. He would’ve responded with a self-deprecating remark about convincing forgeries, but a sleek black vehicle with heavily-tinted windows pulled to a stop by Margot. She didn’t turn to look at it, but Will could see from her stiffening posture and suddenly downcast gaze that she knew what awaited her.

“Thank you for your time, Will,” she purred in her velvety voice and flashed one more discreet, knowing smile before she turned away.

Will observed from the walkway as a driver hurried to open the rear door for Margot with a tip of his head and an overly polite, “Good evening, Ms. Verger”

Margot Verger. The last name sounded familiar, though Will couldn’t place it.

The car rolled onward down the street at a leisurely pace, and for a moment, Will felt like just a guy in front of an office building, the kind of unassuming albeit distracted man who a pretty woman might stop to ask a casual question. Maybe that guy would show up early for his next few appointments on the off-chance of running into her again; maybe he’d even embarrassedly Google her name to see why she seemed oddly familiar. That man, that life was a possibility for Will; he could feel it from time to time, a moment of normality dabbed along a lifetime of abnormalcy. Slipping behind the mask of such a man was a temptation too real and too terrifying to entertain for long. In the past, he would dismiss it with the knowledge that eventually the parts of him that were fundamentally, innately wrong would reemerge, destroying whomever had come too close during his epic game of make-believe. Now, though he retained the same desire to shield those from him, he felt with equal fervor the need to guard from outsiders the grim chambers of his mind where a creature that wore his visage dwelled. It was a part of him now-- had always been-- and it was his responsibility.

Returning to his body, Will shivered as the cold struck him again, and he walked swiftly to the building entrance, through the front door, and to the waiting room. He rounded the corner just as Hannibal opened the door to his office.

“Good evening, Will,” Hannibal greeted in his usual, staid fashion. The lightly checked suit and severe backward sweep of his hair seemed wrong in Will’s eyes, but he recognized now this was the mask Hannibal wore to protect his own monster. A surge of curiosity tingled

down Will's spine as he wondered what that creature looked like when it was given the freedom to claw to the surface. He'd seen its work.

Will shook off his coat and hung it on the rack by the door. He walked toward his chair, but he saw a ghostly Margot Verger sitting in it and took a sharp turn instead and went to stand by the fireplace. Following suit, Hannibal sat at the chair behind his desk instead of his usual spot. They sat quietly for a few minutes, letting themselves settle into the arrangement.

"Aren't you going to ask what's troubling me, Dr. Lecter?" Will asked, harsher than he meant.

Hannibal was neither surprised nor offended by the tone.

"Need I?" he questioned in return, no change in expression or position.

The dark-haired man standing in front of the flames sighed, then leaned back against the wall next to the fireplace.

"There's a killer. He uses some kind of weapon or suit made of animals-- teeth, claws. He slaughtered sheep outside the city. He's hunting people now. Ripped apart a trucker. I'm having difficulty seeing him," Will explained, the admission slipping out of him unplanned.

The man across from him crossed his legs and let his limbs relax over the arms of the chair. His eyes glanced to the side of the room.

"Do you think he believes he is an animal?" Hannibal asked, prompting Will to think through the evidence methodically once more.

"He had to use a bear's teeth and claws to kill. He knows he isn't an animal. He's reminded of that every time he murders," Will responded, processing his thoughts aloud. "But if he recognizes he's a man, why is he escalating his kills?"

Hannibal brought his hands to clasp together on his lap and looked in Will's eyes as he spoke, "He knows he was born a man and cannot change that unfortunate fact. Yet, his desire to be a beast is not faded by that knowledge."

Will shifted on the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

"He'll kill humans to prove he isn't one of them?"

Hannibal's head fell a bit to the side as he examined Will from an angle.

"I very much doubt he considers this his motive, even if it is. He is acting on instinct, and those instincts are being refined."

"Evolving," Will clarified, the image of the man coming into sharper focus than it had before. He would be wearing a suit of bones, his claws sharpened into knives.

"Can you see him now, Will?" Hannibal asked, already detecting the answer on Will's face.

“This isn’t new in his life,” Will continued, casting more light onto the shadowy figure in the woods. “He’s struggled with a sense of being trapped in his body for years. Maybe all of his life.”

The minute drop of Hannibal’s cheeks from a look of mounting approval to an expression of utter objectivity was not lost on Will. He replayed his own words in his mind, searching for the cause. He stared directly at Hannibal, who returned the gaze with even intensity. A few long moments of silence passed, Will’s righteous indignation rising with his certainty that Hannibal was not disclosing something.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered the name warningly, “no more lies.”

The words that didn’t need to be given voice were written in the air between them: *If I leave again, I won’t come back.*

Hannibal’s expression remained set and his eyes didn’t move from Will’s glare. When he spoke again, it was in an even, emotionless voice.

“How does a man procure the materials necessary to construct such a suit?”

Will’s piercing eyes softened with thought, and he replied, “He works with fossils. A museum, maybe, or a university.”

Hannibal’s unnervingly dispassionate voice prodded, “And what does that suggest about this man?”

“He’s educated, has the appearance of stability. He learned to manage his image,” Will responded, coming to stand on his feet without his back propped against the wall.

“How did he learn this?” the older man pressed.

“In therapy,” Will answered immediately. Hannibal’s expression relaxed again, and Will scoffed in exasperation. “He was your patient?”

“I can’t be certain,” Hannibal began in a markedly more conversational tone. “But if he is the man I imagine, his was a rare pathology.”

In long strides, Will walked toward Hannibal’s desk. He needed to see the man for just a few moments, to know that he was still real under the well-fashioned construct of Dr. Lecter. He half-sat on the edge of the desk, and Hannibal turned his chair to face Will. Up close, the angles were softer and the eyes closer to amber than coal. Will had a wild impulse to reach out a hand and trace the defined jawline, run his fingertips through the graying blonde hair to shake it loose; competing with this impulse was the sudden need to wrap his hands around the man’s throat until his eyes went glassy, ending Will’s frustration once and for all.

“How many of your patients have killed someone?” Will asked directly, too consumed with managing himself to ask a more nuanced version of the question.

“A few,” Hannibal answered, no note of antagonism in his voice.

Will rubbed his hands over his eyes and shook his head.

Will wondered what kinds of patients Hannibal sought out-- were they all like Will? All harboring a darkness? Did Hannibal treat them the same as he did Will, using half-veiled truths and poetry to polish a grimmer reality?

Sounding more insulted than hurt, Will spat, “Was I an experiment? *Am* I an experiment?”

The look of cold seriousness that tightened the lines of Hannibal’s face hinted at his well-concealed upset. For a moment, Will worried that the monster within Hannibal and the one within Will would tear each other to bloody shreds before they reached any sort of true understanding.

Instead, maintaining composure but speaking in icy tones, Hannibal stated, “If you are my experiment, then perhaps I am equally yours.”

The words were unexpectedly cutting, and while Will’s mind caged them and stored them away for safe-keeping, he continued the conversation at hand unabated, “What about the others? What was your purpose?”

“I wish the same for all of my patients: A life lived as one truly wishes to live it.”

Will closed his eyes and lifted his face upward to the ceiling, stretching his increasingly tense neck and hoping for the roof to cave in on them both. It would be a mercy they did not deserve.

“Who is he?” Will’s tone was less acidic now.

Hannibal was silent, then questioningly said, “I could deliver him to you.”

The shadowy ceiling above came into view as Will’s eyes flickered open. He lowered his head and cast his gaze at the body sitting next to him.

“A man who believes he is a monster. He’s a rare opportunity for you, Will.” Hannibal was sure of these words. Then, a microscopic frown crossed his face as he added, “I worry you’ve not fully recovered from your encounter with Mr. Ingram, however.”

The older man was not goading or amusing himself by stirring Will’s conflicting emotions. He was entirely genuine in his suggestion. Recognizing how warm his palms had gotten and how rigid his muscles were at the mere offer, Will begrudgingly conceded to himself that Hannibal wasn’t being as foolish as Will would’ve tried to claim. In his mind, Will could already see the moonlight glinting off of blood-splattered fangs, could feel the flesh of a man hiding inside a suit of armor giving way under his fists. He pushed the image away quickly, although he suspected Hannibal saw it reflected in Will’s eyes. The painful spasm in his side as he tamed his quickening breath reminded him that even if he had truly lost his mind and wanted to accept this unholy gift, he was not physically prepared for it yet.

“It would be reckless,” Will dismissed the suggestion simply.

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, understanding more than Will wanted. As consolation, he offered, “Try natural history museums first. More bones available results in less alarm when a few go missing.”

Will nodded, the electricity in his limbs ebbing as the picture of him beating a half-man, half-animal disintegrated. He should have foreseen all of this: Him using his leverage to pry the truth from Hannibal only for the other man to find the exact wound to jab that would send Will reeling. It was a dance between them, the music only audible to the pair who knew the frequency. Will was tired of dancing tonight, though.

“I met one of your patients on my way in,” Will said without prelude. “Margot Verger.”

The look that briefly crossed Hannibal’s face was unidentifiable even to Will.

“She was interested in discussing you,” Will remarked, trying to discern Hannibal’s reaction. “Seemed less homicidal than your typical client. Or maybe she was better at hiding it.”

“Margot possesses the motivation to kill but not the aptitude. Not yet. She’s planning an alternative approach to accomplish her task,” Hannibal vaguely answered. Then, eyes scanning Will’s body in an unnerving manner, he added, “She may consider soliciting your assistance.”

Will raised his eyebrows, his earlier daydream of being a normal man who normal women flirted with being thoroughly erased. Margot was obviously wealthy, but he couldn’t imagine her attempting to solicit his help in murdering someone.

“Assistance?” Will repeated the word with uncertainty.

“She wants a child.”

The words were heard but not immediately understood. The prospect of a woman like Margot Verger setting forth into the world in search of a genetic donor-- and considering Will in that light-- was more preposterous than the notion of killing a man-beast. Will felt himself flush mildly as the graphic details of such *assistance* breezed across his mind. He looked down at his hands braced on the edge of the desk as the next torrent of emotion passed through him: Guilt. The feeling knocked him off-kilter, and he closed his eyes again, this time to find the firmness of the ground beneath his feet without the distraction of searching eyes.

He had enjoyed the fleeting attention of an attractive woman-- he was alive and not so lost in his mind that he couldn’t acknowledge it. He could play at being ordinary for a few minutes without harming anyone, then resume his actual, complicated life. Yet, imagining that scenario extending to the point where he touched Margot, kissed her, laid down across his bed with her-- that was entirely different. Will couldn’t fathom these events unfolding any more than he could having a child with Margot, entangling himself in the life of a woman whom he was wholly incapable of loving. Will shouldn’t have felt guilty-- these were all only thoughts-- but he did. It was worsened by his knowledge that when he opened his eyes, Hannibal would be observing him intently.

His side throbbing as he held his breath, Will realized he had gotten himself into a situation far more twisted than he thought possible: He knew who the man beside him was, yet he wasn't able to cleanly sweep away the feelings that bound them together. There was no imaginable future that excluded Hannibal entirely, but the mere presence of Hannibal in his life precluded the possibility of any other person meaningfully entering it.

When Will opened his eyes, he kept his face turned mostly toward the fire but looked at the man sideways as he reluctantly but firmly said, "I'm not interested."

"Margot's resilient. She'll find another collaborator for her project," Hannibal remarked with an air of amusement slipping into his voice.

Will gave a hollow smile and replied, "I used to think I wanted to be a father. I wonder now how I was so mistaken."

"What do you think has changed?" Hannibal asked sincerely, although to Will the answer was horribly clear.

"Me," Will responded simply. Then, after a beat of silence, he explained further, "Killing is a selfish act, even killing someone like Clark Ingram. I can't imagine introducing a child into my world, not now."

Hannibal looked into the fire, the red lighting his eyes. His relaxed jaw and brow suggested he was deep in thought. Will didn't worry that he would offer a platitude or refutation of his cynical statement; it was one of Hannibal's better qualities.

"Our life has a sister vessel which plies an entirely different route. All sketches wish to be real," Hannibal quoted. "Maybe in a life beyond this one."

They passed the rest of the evening together in amiable silence, the cracking of the fire and whistling of the wind outside of the windows the only sound. When Will left, his exit was marked only by a glance at his watch and a final look into Hannibal's warmed eyes.

The world around Will seemed small and close on his drive home. The darkness expanded inward around him, compressing his car and the air he breathed. It was safe and suffocating. He cracked the window in spite of the cold.

Two-thirds of the way home, the stretch of highway mostly empty because of the hour and the distance from the city, Will slammed on his brakes with a screech. The car slid a bit, so he laid off and corrected as much as he could without sending the vehicle skittering across the road the other way. When the car came to a stop, he looked in the rearview mirror at the road behind him painted red by his taillights. He pulled the car to the shoulder, put it in park, and turned on his flashers. He exited and walked back to where he had first started braking; his heart was still pounding in his throat, but he managed to whistle a few times as he looked around worriedly. From the treeline to his side, he heard a rustling, then saw the small white shape that had almost caused him to wreck.

"Hey," he said gently, crouching down and breathing a sigh of relief. The dog on the side of the road looked suspicious but not aggressive. "Hey, buddy."

The dog took a few steps but wouldn't walk over the white line dividing the shoulder from the highway.

Well-versed in this practice by now, Will stood slowly and went to his trunk. He dug around and pulled a bag of dog treats out of where it was stored safely in the center hollow of his spare tire. He returned to his place in the road across from the dog and gave the treat bag a light shake. The dog took a few steps backward, then came forward again. Will broke off a piece and tossed it gently toward the white figure.

They continued in this slow exchange of treats for proximity until the dog was at his feet. She was easily one of the ugliest dogs Will had ever laid eyes on-- white fur discolored and matted, skinny legs, black bug eyes, and an extremely pronounced underbite-- and he felt the tug of affection in his chest immediately. With some negotiating, he was able to get her in the car and lying on a blanket in the passenger-side footwell.

When they arrived home, Will gave her a pep talk before leashing her.

"You're gonna meet the gang. They'll be good to you, but Jack might run over you sometimes. You'll fit right in."

He walked her to the porch and let her sniff around. She took in all of the scents voraciously, tail wagging all the while. He gave her water to drink, then bathed her in the barn in a large bucket of water warmed by the kerosene heater; sitting next to the heater, he held her wrapped in a towel until she had mostly dried. He grabbed the dog crate from the corner of the barn and carried it to the porch while keeping hold on the leash. He put the damp towel and the blanket from the car into the crate, along with another small bite of a treat. She looked uneasy, but Will stood calmly by her side until she entered. Once she had settled in the locked cage, he opened the door for the rest of the family to come inspect the new member.

The dogs ran out, caught the new dog's scent, and turned toward the end of the porch with the cage. Will gave a short warning whistle, and they paused a few feet away. Will came to sit next to the cage, laying a hand on the cold metal of the top lattice.

"This is Zoe," he said to the six curious canines. "Zoe, this is everybody."

He sat outside with the dogs for over an hour, giving them time to sniff and eyeball one another. After a time, he shooed the other dogs off the porch and opened the cage for Zoe to exit when she felt comfortable. He joined his family in the yard and kept an eye out to make sure none of them tried to sneak back. They were well-trained, though, and they were happy enough to be running and playing fetch with Will or tackling one another. When Zoe finally left the safety of the crate and made it to the porch steps, Max darted toward her, his tail wagging in a visible posture of friendliness. He didn't go onto the porch, but the sight of his eagerness encouraged the tiny, white dog to take her first steps into the yard. After that, Will knew she would be okay.

She was theirs, and they were hers now.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Short-ish chapter but there is a familiar face =) Thank you for reading and making me smile with your wonderful comments!

The quotes are from Charles Baudelaire and *Paradise Lost*.

After a relatively late night introducing Zoe to the rest of the family and helping her acclimate to her new home, Will was not prepared to be woken by a firm rapping. As a rule, people didn't venture out to Wolf Trap for fun, and they assuredly did not pull up a gravel driveway and knock on a stranger's door without good cause. Will blinked blearily at the noise and reached for his glasses. The dogs stirred on the floor and looked curiously at the front door, but they didn't hurry to ward off whoever came calling at 6:03 AM on a Thursday. Will shot the group of them a look-- great security they were not-- and peeked out the window at his driveway as another round of knocking began.

A bronze Mercedes shimmered among the rocks.

Will ran a hand through his hair and went to the door without bothering to dress. He was wearing a threadbare white t-shirt and oversized boxers, and he knew his curls would be pointing in every possible direction. If the owner of the Mercedes was displeased with his appearance, he or she was welcome to get back in the ostentatious vehicle and leave.

As surly as Will felt, however, he was unable to avoid feeling exposed when he opened the door to find an icy blonde woman with delicate features staring back at him. She was wrapped in a tailored, sand-colored trench coat that fit like a second skin, and her white leather gloves gave the impression she was not accustomed to touching anything which had ever, at any point, been dirty. In life, she looked exactly as she had in the photos Will found when Hannibal first divulged the name of his therapist months ago: Bedelia Du Maurier.

"Will Graham?" the woman asked in a breathy voice.

The sound struck Will as amusingly similar to the tones affected by women in late-night television advertisements for erotic chat lines. He didn't believe Dr. Du Maurier would enjoy the comparison, though, so he kept it to himself. Besides, her unexpected-- and impossible to ignore-- presence irritated Will in a way that transcended her initial crime of interrupting his sleep. Once, he would have grasped at the chance to meet Hannibal's therapist-- the mysterious woman who was given a veritable passport into the man's thoughts. Now, many weeks and lifetimes of experience beyond that time, Will only wondered how horribly flawed this woman must be to continue serving in such a futile and hazardous role.

Shaking off his wayward thoughts about the woman before him, he asked brusquely, “What do you want?”

Dr. Du Maurier looked Will over appraisingly and, judging by the lift of her chin and subtle narrowing of her eyes, found him thoroughly lacking.

“Aren’t you a surprise?” she asked in the same throaty, whispering tone. She stared at Will through the screen door, an aura of haughty amusement surrounding her. Will was swiftly transcending from irritated to mad when she added, “I’m here to help you, Mr. Graham.”

Will suspended the acidic retort rising in his throat, intrigue getting the better of him.

“I see,” Will responded, though he truly did not whatsoever. “You might want to take a step back.”

Bedelia looked at him questioningly as he opened the door and the sound of a small stampede of paws began from somewhere within the house. As Jack bounded out ahead of the others, the woman did take several steps backward and held a hand out warningly. Will redirected the dogs but took more than a small amount of pleasure in making her squirm.

“Coffee?” Will asked pleasantly enough when the group of dogs all made it into the yard without incident.

The woman’s lifted brow and wide eyes suggested she very much did not want to enter the home, but she replied, “Yes, thank you.”

Will sat her down at his kitchen table, pushing aside the box from Hannibal that still occupied much of the space. As he worked on the coffee, she removed her gloves and placed them neatly in her bag. Her eyes surveyed the scene and, with special interest, the box, though she remained silent and tried to appear uninterested.

“Help yourself,” Will said coldly, gesturing toward it and causing her to look away, caught.

After a quiet moment, she questioned, “Do you know who I am?”

Will smiled humorously as he poured water into the drip coffee maker.

“Dr. Bedelia Du Maurier, Hannibal Lecter’s psychiatrist. How’d you land that job?”

Bedelia sat rod-straight in her chair, her face set in a disdainful scowl.

“I came here to help you,” Bedelia repeated.

Will scoffed disbelievingly and placed two coffee mugs down on the counter a bit harder than he should have. She did not flinch at the noise.

“Think you’re the first psychiatrist who’s said that to me? You need a better pickup line,” Will returned. “Go ahead. *Help me.*”

Bedelia shook her head and stared at Will like he was a petulant teenager and she his long-suffering mother.

“This is unethical, but I’d rather risk losing my license than my freedom-- or my life,” she began dramatically. “Have you any idea how dangerous your association with Hannibal Lecter is, Mr. Graham?”

Will poured coffee into the two mugs and placed one in front of Bedelia. He sat directly across from her and watched her with a steely gaze.

“I’m certain you’ll inform me,” he flatly commented, staring at her over his glasses.

“Hannibal is fixated on you. He sees in you the possibility of understanding. He finds your empathy as seductive as the possibility to mold it. There is no safety in being the devil’s beloved,” Bedelia explained slowly in her breathless voice. Then, with an air of self-satisfied knowing, she quoted, “Some furtherance of Hell each new day brings, and yet we feel no horror in that rank advance.”

Will didn’t particularly care for an overdressed stranger lecturing him in his own home before his first cup of coffee, and he was rapidly growing tired of her unconcealed disapproval.

“If there’s a point to this conversation, I’d like to arrive at it,” Will ground out in a low voice.

“Hannibal’s power lies in his uniquely potent ability to persuade. He will convince you to kill, and he will cause you to believe it was your idea,” she described in a measured but convicted tone. Then, raising her thin, arched brows, she added, “He may already have.”

He began to understand why this woman would venture out to Wolf Trap, Virginia, to convince a man she’d never met to agree with her interpretation of Hannibal’s methods. A wry, pained smile on his face, Will plucked a line from his memory and replied, “Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.”

Bedelia looked less pleased now.

The woman and Will considered each other shrewdly. Her eyes remained cold and far more indifferent than her words suggested. For his part, Will leaned against the chair with his arms crossed over his t-shirt-clad chest, unswayed and unimpressed. She was here for herself, not for him; he had seen the articles about the man she killed and the ongoing investigation into his untimely demise. It was as good a spear as any.

“I read about you, Bedelia. A patient of yours died. You killed him,” Will conversationally stated, then took a sip of coffee. He watched her stiffen and push away from the table a few inches as the sharp words hit a raw nerve.

“He attacked me. It was self-defense,” she immediately and harshly asserted.

Will exhaled a laugh and responded, “It must be awfully convenient to have someone else to blame: the patient, Hannibal, anyone but yourself. I know you can’t tell the truth, but don’t lie. It’s insulting.”

She sneered, her exquisite mouth twisting and her cold eyes lit from within. Tone washed in bitterness, she replied, “You know nothing. You survived him, and you *went back*. You’re a fool-- he’ll slit your throat and you’ll thank him for it.”

Will maintained his detached demeanor, reclined in the chair and frowning in affected sympathy instead of outrage.

“It’s odd, isn’t it? A retired therapist with one patient,” he smoothly observed. Then, condescension dripping from each word, he remarked, “Bedelia, you’ll live longer if you concern yourself with what your mind allows to take root, not who tends to it.”

“Are you threatening me?” she questioned in a tone nearer to offense than fear.

Will shook his head and answered without feeling, “I’m helping you.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t,” Bedelia slowly whispered.

“Then our conversation is finished.”

Her chest rose and fell heavily with a few deep, shaky breaths, and her cheeks were tinged with the lightest touch of pink. She stood gracefully, keeping her eyes on Will’s until she turned. He followed her to the door, glad to see her out.

In the doorway, she turned to him, her profile illuminated by the early morning sunlight. Collected, she offered him her final words: “Mr. Graham, when you finally feel the noose around your neck, remember me.”

Will didn’t attempt a response, only watched her retreat from his front porch. Her parting strike told Will what he needed to know: She was afraid of Hannibal and, now, him. She wouldn’t again turn up on his doorstep before sunrise, invading his space at her pleasure and spewing half-truths in his kitchen. Bedelia knew enough of Hannibal and Will both to be dangerous, but she did not know enough to be wise.

Zoe’s tiny paws tapped closer, and Will looked down at the noise.

“It isn’t always like this,” he told the dog looking curiously up at him. The sound of scraping from the other end of the porch caught their attention, and Will glanced up to see Buster batting at his food bowl theatrically, one of the dog’s favorite ploys when he felt breakfast was not being served in a timely manner. Will sighed and went inside to prepare food for a group of seven.

He threw Bedelia’s lip-stick stained mug into the trash can on the way to the refrigerator.

After the dogs were fed, Will loitered uneasily in his living room. In the quiet of the morning, the fingertips of his mind sank deeply into her words, pulling them apart and pressing them together again in new designs. Sometimes they took the shape of Bedelia pointing a manicured finger at Hannibal for the death of her patient; sometimes they formed the image of a knife sliding across a throat. He took a cold shower to erode the jagged contours of these thoughts.

At Quantico, the first students to enter the classroom glanced at Will's tightly-wound form and glowering face and averted their eyes. Will felt no shame at this-- if the students were unable to withstand a moody professor, they were not fit to live the horrors that awaited them in the field. They might not thank him one day, but maybe they would live to see retirement. First, of course, they had to pass their midterm.

Time moved at a sluggish pace as Will proctored the exam from his place perched on the edge of his desk. A confused young man wearing a costume of fossils skulked amid the shadows of the room. Will observed his movements with untroubled interest-- the same aloof expression on his face whether watching the faceless man or anxious students. The man was just beyond his reach-- he saw him now but couldn't touch him.

There was no smooth pathway from this point to the man's arrest. If Will went to him with Jack, the killer would repeat whatever he said during Beverly and Crawford's first round of museum visits, but then he would know the FBI suspected him. If Will went alone to the museum, he could do nothing more than ask questions about fossils and missing inventory; at best, the man would lie and wait longer between kills. Will didn't let himself consider for too long what the worst scenario would look like; he suspected it would end with the man's blood under Will's fingernails.

He didn't want that. Not now. It was too soon and too unnecessary.

Will didn't fear the faceless man. Will didn't fear being harmed by him. Will didn't even fear Hannibal manufacturing a situation that would force Will to kill the man.

The only thing Will feared was himself.

Maybe Bedelia was right-- maybe he was a fool.

When he killed Garrett Jacob Hobbs, he took a brick from the wall he had built for himself long ago. He did the same when he killed Tobias Budge, when he killed Clark Ingram, and when he chose to let Hannibal go free. Bedelia may have been wrong to suggest Hannibal could pull ethereal strings to make those around him dance to an unheard tune, but there existed a high-toned ring of truth to her parting words. Will had swung wildly from denying himself to craving the feeling of death under his hands. He knew he wasn't a monster, but he didn't feel like a man either anymore. Will recognized the space he had confined himself to, and he pictured a noose around his neck-- one he tied lovingly and placed there himself. In this image, his body balanced on a thin board, swaying perilously between two worlds.

Will was relieved to find he was not tempted to jump.

When his classes were through, Will sat in his desk chair and enjoyed the feeling of the ground firm beneath his feet. He breathed deeply through the ache in his ribs and began to decide what needed to be done to preserve the delicate balance he was striving-- and thus far in life, failing-- to maintain. Not giving himself time to second-guess, Will pulled out his phone and dialed.

Four tinny rings sounded, then a click, and a voice.

“Hello?” Hannibal answered, questioning.

Without delay, Will responded, “We need to talk.”

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much for being patient as I deal with the craziness of work that I've mentioned a time or ten before. I appreciate you all so much! 💗 💗

Friday evening arrived dark and chilly with heavy, gray clouds promising rain, or possibly sleet, blocking any hint of lingering sunlight. While Will wasn't looking forward to the muggy heat of a Virginia summer, he missed the light. If it were June or July, he would be watching the sun dip behind the treeline right now instead of waiting for headlights to cast their concentrated beams on him and his home. He was made colder by the glass of whiskey on the rocks held between his hands. An identical one sat on the porch railing, awaiting his guest.

Will was anxious. He was angry. He was hurt. He was excited. He was embarrassed.

But mostly, he was tired, and he intended to reach some sort of resolution, by force if necessary. Not for the first time, he thought about how if one or both of them died in the process, at least there would be a clean finish to a messy relationship.

That's what he told himself, though he knew neither was entirely capable of so easily severing the other from his life now.

The dogs stirred when the car crunched onto the gravel driveway; then, recognizing the vehicle, they propelled themselves off of the porch and into the yard, led entirely by their stomachs. Zoe, who had never been gifted with Hannibal's gourmet treats, stood a few feet from Will, looking unsurely between him and the rest of the family. The dogs came closer to the vehicle when the man stepped out, staying just far enough that Will wouldn't call them back for having bad manners.

Will didn't watch as Hannibal greeted them by name and gave them their treats, although he did notice Zoe take off running toward the group as soon as she noticed Ellie chewing. He took a slow sip of his drink as he bitterly considered the traitors surrounding him. In his periphery, he saw the group dispersing and the dark figure moving toward him, and he took an even, bracing breath.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal greeted, examining Will's still body. In response, Will pointed to the glass on the railing, which Hannibal proceeded to take with a ghost of a curious smile.

The man sat down next to Will on the steps, and Will felt a tingle of satisfaction that Hannibal's austere, expensive coat was wedged against a porch that had not been swept since fall. They sat quietly, sipping their drinks, while the dogs settled in the yard around them.

Staring at the dark yard and his family dotting it in furry circles, Will said determinedly, leaving no room for true argument, “You’re going to tell Jack who the killer is.”

Hannibal didn’t tense but tilted his head to look toward Will.

“I am?” he questioned conversationally. Then, somewhat more seriously but still friendly, he added, “It would deprive you of the opportunity of apprehending him.”

“When he’s arrested, the FBI will put together a comprehensive profile, which would include any history of personality disorders,” Will emotionlessly explained, still looking ahead.

“I’ve not spoken to this man in many years. Therapists cannot be blamed for the actions of their former patients,” Hannibal responded without a trace of concern audible in his voice.

Will had considered the situation from every angle since he had sussed out the killer’s connection to Hannibal. All of them ended with this connection being revealed to Jack and the agent adding a new chapter to his understanding of the doctor-- one that could darkly tint his image of Hannibal. Alone, it was questionable but not damning that Hannibal had been the psychiatrist of a serial killer and somehow did not connect the news stories with his former patient, but there was no guarantee Crawford would not one day, at last, find evidence at one of the Ripper scenes. If-- when-- that happened, being revealed as the therapist of a psychopathic murderer could be the difference between simple suspicion and formal interrogation.

Will sighed at the wholly expected flippancy and set his jaw. Winston stretched languidly, then walked toward the pair and sat in front of them, his large eyes indicating he sensed the tension between them to some degree. Hannibal deserved for his hubris to be his own downfall; Will, however, had no intention of the man’s ego risking the life he had painstakingly created in Wolf Trap.

“It’s attention you don’t need-- *I* don’t need,” Will stated through his tightening throat. He turned his head and mirrored Hannibal’s position, lifting his light eyes to meet far darker ones.

“Our fates are intertwined,” Hannibal responded, only just above a whisper.

Will’s eyes scanned Hannibal’s face, waiting for a gleam of facetiousness or a crumb of philosophy-- some overwrought metaphor meant to crawl under Will’s skin and suffocate him from the inside out. The relaxed muscles of the man’s sharp face and his thoughtful, shadowed eyes revealed nothing more than sincerity-- or, Will thought cynically, a very good impression of it. Even through his veil of bitterness, Will sensed a shift with the man’s words, a gesture away from opposition and obscurity.

In response, Will answered with the truth that had sparked in his subconscious many months ago and had grown to nothing short of an inferno since.

Speaking deliberately, he said, “You and I are connected. Conjoined.” He paused, let his words hook into Hannibal’s consciousness. Then, quieter, he continued, “I’ve failed to find a means of separation we might both survive.”

They watched one another, searching for signs of threat or warmth-- both had the potential to cut. Seeing no change in expression or body, Will looked back out into the yard contemplatively.

“I spent years alone. You spent decades alone. Unknown, unknowable,” he thought aloud, feeling the dark eyes leave his face as Hannibal, too, looked ahead into the inky night. Weakly, he commented, “It would have been better if we didn’t realize there was another option.”

“Maybe there’s a world where we are strangers,” Hannibal mused after a moment of thought. “You are here, on your porch, and I’m in Baltimore, both of us gazing at the same constellations.” Will imagined this and felt a profound emptiness that ached in the space behind his ribs. Before he could think too deeply on it, though, Hannibal added, “It’s not a life I would choose.”

Will put his glass down beside him on the steps and ran his damp fingers through his hair, then rested his elbows against his thighs, gaze moving downward to the ground directly in front of him. The yellow light from the house turned their shapes into ghostly silhouettes.

“The curse of knowledge,” he said, mostly to himself.

Many long moments of silence passed between them. In the cold spring night, no crickets chirped or cicadas sang. It gave Will the sense that the world beyond their circle of light had ceased to exist, leaving them alone and safe, yet protected by darkness.

Unexpectedly, Hannibal turned to him, face softened with now-familiar affection, and remarked, “You know, Will, sometimes I think I should’ve killed you when I could.”

A testament to how completely wrong things had gone in his life, Will chuckled in response, and with a raise of his brows, he quickly replied, “Imagine how boring life would be.”

The older man gave him a closed-mouth smile and a dry laugh rumbled somewhere in his throat. Will picked back up his glass, took a sip, and spoke again in a similarly light, nonchalant tone that did not match his words, “You’d try to kill me, I’d try to kill you. I’d run, you’d run. It would never end.”

“The universe was born from chaos,” Hannibal responded with a philosopher’s inflection. “Neither of us could claim victory or defeat. Would you accept a stalemate, Will?”

“Born from chaos and desperately seeking equilibrium,” Will corrected with no harshness in his voice. “*That* I can accept.”

Will heard Hannibal take a deep breath in and exhale a sound that wasn’t quite a sigh.

“The challenge, then, is in maintaining it,” the older man answered. From the corner of his eye, Will could see Hannibal’s eyes turn upward toward the clouded sky. “I’ll speak to Jack.”

The words were uttered simply, casually, but the importance was not lost to the night.

Will brought his eyes to the man's face and held his gaze there until Hannibal was compelled to look back at him.

"Thank you, Hannibal," Will said with all of the sincerity he could gather. He wanted him to know it was real.

There was not so much as a crevice left for artifice between them, no matter what they each chose to present to the rest of the world. With a twist of amusement, Will realized that if they resorted to holding tightly onto their chosen facades with one another, they may as well pick up the knives now.

Receiving the unspoken message, Hannibal's expression warmed a touch more, his eyes scanning over Will's face and lingering only a second too long on his mouth. Competing surges of warmth and panic flooded Will's stomach, prompting him to stand abruptly.

"It's cold," he said, a poor excuse even to his own ears.

A glint in the dark eyes watching Will and a small smile that bordered perilously on what might be called roguish-- a term that made Will groan inwardly now-- suggested that Hannibal wasn't acting entirely on impulse.

The dogs rushed toward the men as they rose and went to the door. Hannibal stood aside as Will held the door open and the gang rushed in, vying for their preferred positions near the fireplace. The pair followed the dogs in and shrugged off their coats. Hannibal followed Will to the living room, his eyes absorbing the home that had not changed in his absence. Will wondered if it looked different to him or if it still felt as comfortable as Hannibal's home had to Will when he appeared there covered in blood and grave dirt.

They settled into the armchairs by the bookshelves, their knees almost touching, and listened to the sounds of the dogs huddling and then negotiating spaces. Will sat his glass down on the ground next to the chair, the drink unappealing to his turning stomach.

Delicacy never truly being a strength of his, Will stated matter-of-factly, "Your psychiatrist came to my house."

Amusement dropped from Hannibal's features and was replaced with an almost startled look, eyes wider and mouth thinner than before.

"Bedelia?" he asked, his sharp eyes fixing on Will but not entirely seeing him.

"Blonde. Well-dressed. Didactic," Will described with no attempt to hide his disdain.

At Will's scornful tone, Hannibal eased a bit and came back to the moment.

"What was the purpose of her visit?" he asked as though inquiring about the weather.

Will emitted a scoffing laugh and answered derisively, "She wanted to warn me about you. You force us *innocents* of the world to kill."

A microscopic smile hinted at the corners of Hannibal's mouth, though his eyes were still intense and turned somewhere inward.

"You disagree with her assessment of my pathology?" he questioned.

In response, Will huffed dismissively and replied, "I disagree with her assessment of mine. She was very eager to blame you for my sins."

His voice laced in his returning humor, Hannibal retorted, "A confession is typically a prerequisite for absolution."

"The only person Bedelia cares about absolving is herself," Will quickly correctly, a trace of venom in his voice.

"Her instinct for self-preservation is exquisite," Hannibal agreed with no malice or disgust. Seemingly comfortable with the idea, Hannibal added, "It's a clever enough plan. What would another murder charge be to me? Or two more, for that matter?"

"She doesn't deserve her innocence," Will growled, unsettled by the other man's acceptance.

"Do you?" he shot back.

Will's voice dropped further as he firmly asserted, "I'm not asking for it."

Hannibal seemed to consider this. He studied Will's features openly, scratching his claws against the surface to find what lay beneath if he only pressed hard enough.

"What if it was freely given?" Hannibal posed the question with no change in tone. He remained friendly and unworried. In the same voice, he clarified, "An invitation to leave your crimes buried in the graveyard, so to speak."

"By blaming you," Will cut to the core of his meaning.

"By saving yourself."

The notion settled poorly in Will's mind. Accepting such an offer was tantamount to demolishing the weeks, months, years of time he spent living in his own head, forming an armistice that would accommodate the warring elements of his mind. He would end up precisely where he had been when he first came to Wolf Trap-- likely worse because of his undeniable knowledge of what he was capable of as well as his guilt at walking freely while Hannibal paced in a cage.

"Too late for that," Will declined the offer. Unsure of what did and did not need to be said, he added, "Who I was...doesn't need to be saved."

Hannibal leaned forward further in his chair, eyes still fixed on Will's. The lines of his brow and mouth were softer, more human, and his eyes were lit to a deep amber around his large, black pupils. Involuntarily, Will leaned forward as well, mirroring the posture. At the

movement, Hannibal reached out a hand toward Will's face, fingers outstretched and loose. Those voices in Will's mind that reminded him he was-- rightfully-- very angry rammed against the impulses directing him to lean into the gesture, to feel the heat of touch and connection. Ultimately, the tugging halves led to Will remaining completely still, frozen in time and space.

Fingertips brushed along Will's cheek, then dropped away swiftly-- not a retreat, but an invitation that could be either accepted or declined with no retribution. When he spoke, Hannibal's words echoed his affection.

"If I spent the rest of my life in this room, watching you unfurl your wings, I would never tire of the beauty."

A dozen replies came to Will's mind--

He could remind Hannibal that his evolution had a body count.

He could suggest Hannibal's own influence was what the good doctor truly found beautiful, not Will's supposed transformation.

He could threaten Hannibal that if he didn't leave Will alone, the rest of his abbreviated life would, in fact, be spent in that room.

He could tell Hannibal that he understood his meaning because the display of Freddie Lounds was still the most beautiful sight Will had ever beheld.

But Will knew from a lifetime of experience that words were sharp, jagged things when mishandled, and he didn't trust himself with them now. No, he could not respond appropriately when he felt the pull of longing and memory low in his stomach. He couldn't deny as easily as he would have liked the fact that when they were together, Will felt real-- the kind of solidity that came only from, at last, being seen and known. He missed this in every conceivable way: the certainty of himself, the comfort of camaraderie, the freedom of candor, and-- he had to admit-- the too-rare enjoyment at being touched.

These thoughts pulled Will backward in time.

Recalling their final moments together in a Baltimore foyer, he touched the outside of Hannibal's hand, glided his fingers gently up the man's arm and over his shoulder, brushed his neck, and finally landed along Hannibal's jaw. Will held up his memory against reality and found the images fit neatly one over the other: the angles of the jaw, the deep color of the eyes, the sharpness of the cheeks, the faintest wrinkles that remained even when relaxed.

All was the same, and all was right.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

> Have I told you all how wonderful you are? I appreciate everyone who reads and extra appreciate everyone who takes the time to leave a comment. It's incredibly encouraging, especially these days when I feel like my brain is going in a million different directions. Thanks, guys! ❤️ ❤️ ❤️

Will let his hand fall away from the sharp, familiar face and land on Hannibal's neck. The close proximity was perilous and intoxicating, the air seeming to spark with each body's simmering energy. This was not the first time they had found themselves in such a position, yet in a certain light, it was. It was the first time Will, as he was and not as he wished to be, saw the entirety of the man before him and allowed it to kindle the heat of combined affection and desire in his core. He was warm, flushed throughout his body, and sensitive to every breath and movement.

The two remained unmoving for many seconds, reading the messages in one another's faces. Will noticed the blown pupils in dark eyes, the relaxed brow and slightly parted lips, the way Hannibal's gaze lingered too long on his mouth as it had earlier. For his part, Will could imagine exactly how he looked: Wide-eyed, tense, and threatening an explosion of an unknowable kind. Will kept them held in this stillness, aware that crossing this boundary now-- with secrets revealed and loyalties realigned-- was not something to be done lightly. There was a solidity and an intensity that Hannibal brought to all aspects of his life: He didn't live in a house; he built a shrine to his life and his interests. He didn't have a job; he found a profession that allowed him to practice his most complex manipulations in the light of day. Likewise, Will thought, Hannibal didn't have relationships; he devoted himself wholly to the religion of enveloping Will into his life and his mind. It was possible the only exit from this sort of bond would be death, which was disconcerting at best.

And yet, with this knowledge all laid achingly bare, Will drew himself closer.

He let his fingertips press firmly into the back of the neck they were laid upon, and he brought his opposite hand to rest gently on the side of Hannibal's thigh. Pausing a final time to look into the dark eyes, Will felt a deep exhale of breath and took comfort in the vague notion that Will might unnerve Hannibal as much, if not more, than Hannibal unnerved him.

The first gentle brush of lips to lips pulled Will's focus from his mind to his body. He had missed this touch, this intimacy, and he was too heated and overstimulated to feel ashamed of that. The second connection, immediately following the first, was firmer and warmer, lips slightly parted and the two finding their angle again. Will kneaded the back of the other man's neck and let his tongue dart into a welcoming mouth, a quick caress first then a taste; at this, Hannibal's hands came to rest on Will's sides, fingers edging toward his back.

It took a greater amount of control than Will had ever credited himself with having when he pulled back, both men breathing a bit harder than they had been, and said in as calm and even a tone as he could summon, “This...will take time.”

Hannibal looked at him glassily for a moment, still coming back to himself, but nodded.

With a last squeeze of his hand against Hannibal’s neck, Will leaned back and let oxygen back into his lungs with a slow, deep breath. He had rarely seen Hannibal look disoriented, but there was a note of that now as he straightened his shirt collar and gathered himself. It was deeply satisfying.

This abrupt stop was not truly what Will wanted-- what he *wanted* made his chest and the tops of his cheeks red with another flush of warmth. Yet, it’s what he needed right then. He knew himself, and he knew his own tendency to overthink and, as a result, panic. That could be disastrous now, and he felt compelled to be cautious. How long that caution would last was anyone’s guess.

Heartbeats evening and breath steadying, Will and Hannibal fell into a comfortable silence that eventually faded into bouts of conversation. The two men talked well into the early hours of the morning, relaxed in the worn armchairs with their knees touching. Thinking back on the night, Will couldn’t quite recall their words as the conversations flowed into one another: Peter Bernardone. New Orleans. Food. Paris.

The conversation was unhurried and effortless, even as the looming fog of apprehension slid against the windows of the farmhouse. Allowing himself this luxury equated to choosing a difficult, decisive path-- one fraught with misgivings, death, and deception. Will found it increasingly impossible to ignore, however, that this was not so different from the route he’d been on since birth, only he was not traveling it alone.

Even when Will was stifling yawns and Hannibal’s eyes were more deeply shadowed with encroaching tiredness, neither dared move. They were balanced and secure in their current position, and upsetting the peace they had stolen felt dangerous. Exhaustion creeping in between them, they fell into a comfortable silence some time after 4 AM.

Will didn’t remember falling asleep, but he must have because the room was filling with pale light when his bleary eyes blinked open. In his pocket, his phone vibrated, and he briefly wondered if Jack had a sixth sense for the moments when Will least wanted to be called upon. In the chair across from him, Hannibal’s eyes were still closed, and his head hung heavily; a memory from a hospital room many months ago was plucked from Will’s memory and brought a dull warmth to his chest. He quickly silenced the phone and flipped it off without checking for messages.

Roughly fifteen minutes later, Will’s eyes had grown heavy and were starting to seal shut when a soft ringing brought him back to awareness. This time, Hannibal also flickered open his eyes and, more swiftly than a man going on two hours of sleep should have moved, got up and went to his coat hanging across the room. He produced the offending phone from a pocket and looked at Will knowingly, eliciting an exasperated sigh from the younger man still sitting in the chair.

“Good morning, Jack,” Hannibal answered with genuine tiredness in his voice.

Will listened to Hannibal’s half of the conversation:

“I’m an early riser.”

“Yes, I heard something on the news about a wild animal attack. They speculated it was a bear. How has the FBI become involved?”

“Oh, well that is quite different.”

“Of course, I’d be glad to help in any capacity.”

“I’ll make sure he’s there-- attend to your more pressing matters.”

“No worries at all, Jack. See you soon.”

The call ended, and Will gave Hannibal a prompting look.

“How many bodies?” he asked.

“Two. Great Falls. Jack would like us both present.”

Will exhaled deeply and rubbed his still not entirely focused eyes with his hands. Then, jaw set and a frown deepening the lines of his face, he looked back at Hannibal, who stayed motionless across the room. Will wanted to say that this was Hannibal’s fault, that these two deaths were not necessary. He wanted to say that he shared responsibility for these two deaths and was angry about that fact. The expression on Hannibal’s face-- blank, guarded-- told Will that he knew all of these things already. Seeing the openness harden so quickly to stone disarmed Will more than he liked; he knew this event would not be enough to disentangle them from one another, and he didn’t have the energy to argue. Hannibal would not regret this, and Will was upset for reasons beyond the deaths of two victims. It simply wasn’t a battle worth waging now.

Will stood with a groan and came to stand by Hannibal. Looking him in the eye, Will said, “I’ll go now. Wait here-- takes a lot longer to get there from Baltimore than Wolf Trap.”

A rapid series of emotions flickered across Hannibal’s face in the tiniest details of his features, microexpressions that would have been missed by someone not as well-versed in his moods. A softening of the eyes suggested relief, the quick flicker of them across Will’s face indicated thought, and then something harder to place but not altogether kind pulled the edges of his mouth and brow tighter before he settled on a neutral calm.

“I’ll see to the dogs. Go.”

The tone was lukewarm.

Will nodded, then went to quickly change his shirt and wash his face.

Driving, he worked through the brief exchange they'd had trying to figure out what had happened between them. Will resented Hannibal's delay in revealing the identity of the killer, while Will clearly had committed some sort of transgression in Hannibal's eyes, though he was not at all certain what it was he had done. Too weary to process the situation with full acuity, Will shook his head to himself and continued toward the crime scene.

The police presence extended across the cold landscape toward the trees. Once Will had gotten past the row of parked police SUVs into the open expanse, he could see why. A mauled male body lay near the remnants of a bonfire with blood sprayed out around him and for several feet across the area; some yards away, an equally mutilated female corpse had fallen during what looked like an attempted escape. A trail of blood ran behind where her body landed-- she tried hard to get away, but she was no match for the predator that stalked her.

Will walked between the bodies, the field agents who knew of him side-eyeing him. He caught Brian Zeller's eyes, but the man look away as though he had not seen Will. Zeller kneeled by a yellow evidence identification marker with the number fourteen printed in bold, black font, the metal case holding his field equipment placed to his side, and he busied himself with it now. It didn't hurt Will that people who didn't know him looked at him this way. It came from misunderstanding-- and fear.

Will walked to the side of the male corpse and squatted down by his shoulder. Dipping his head and closing his eyes, Will saw the scene unfold: *The man still wore a suit that made him a beast. He had sharpened his claws and teeth for this night. He watched the couple from the darkness; they did not suspect his presence. He caught them by surprise-- claws slashing without resistance through the male victim's down jacket and carving into flesh. The woman ran, stumbling through the snow; the beast had time to finish the man as the woman struggled against her own fright, screaming in the dark. The man caught the woman easily, no panic obscuring his vision. He tore out her throat and watched the blood melt the snow. He reveled in his violence. Then, without trophy, he vanished into the night, one with himself for a few, peaceful moments.*

From behind Will, Jack's voice sounded deep and clear in the quiet air, "Considering the savagery of the attacks, he's clean and organized. Meticulous, even."
Will looked up at Jack with remorseful eyes.
"This isn't personal; they're his prey. He has the distance to indulge his impulses without getting sloppy," Will replied. "He's constructed his suit and studied the predators he wants to be. He borrows the best parts of them."

Jack crossed his arms and shifted his weight, staring down at the corpse.

Eyes still on the body, he remarked, "This kind of psychosis doesn't just slip through the system."

Will stood and looked toward the woman's body. An inappropriate surge of smugness crossed through him-- he was right in his assessment that Hannibal had to tell Jack what he knew, if only to save himself.

“Dr. Lecter is on the way. Maybe he’ll have greater insight,” Will offered, and Jack nodded in agreement. The lies rolled naturally off of Will’s tongue.

Jack led Will toward the female victim and reported what the lab team had told him: esophagus nearly torn in half and several severed arteries, defensive wounds to the hands and tears on the arms of her coat, yet no signs of post-mortem mutilation. Will half-listened, his attention split between hearing Jack’s words and watching for Hannibal’s arrival. The woman’s glazed eyes stared blindly at the sky, reflecting the grayness of the day. She did nothing to deserve this; she did nothing to avoid this. Will felt another stab of guilt laced with anger.

After a few minutes of Jacking talking at Will, the larger man’s head turned as his gaze focused elsewhere. He waved a hand up solemnly, and Will tried to affect casualness as he looked behind him quickly, nodded a greeting at Hannibal, then looked back at the corpse in front of him without awaiting a response. Will found it more difficult to pretend to be himself than to lie about his knowledge of the crime.

“Dr. Lecter, thank you for coming,” Jack said as Hannibal joined the two men just outside the fans of bloodied snow. “I know you’re not familiar with the case, but this is the second crime scene we’ve linked to a man we believe is using some kind of animal suit to murder his victims. We could use your expertise.”

“I hope I can help, Jack,” Hannibal responded coolly. There was no detectable difference between the version of Hannibal in front of Jack now and the version Crawford normally encountered.

Hannibal’s eyes scanned over the body, and he circled it from just outside the line of police tape. He tucked his hands into his coat pockets and cocked his head to the side in the picture of deep thought. Will wanted to roll his eyes at the entire scene.

“Someone affected by this kind of species dysphoria typically has other conditions. Mood disorders, clinical depression, schizophrenia,” Hannibal explained in the voice Will specifically associated with Dr. Lecter.

“What does he want?” Jack asked.

“Transformation,” Hannibal answered with a furrowing of his brow.

Will huffed a breath of cold air and corrected, “Evolution. He believes he’s becoming superior to what he was.”

A spark of approval lit behind Hannibal’s eyes briefly, and he replied, “I don’t disagree.”

Jack, focused completely on their words and thus missing what was not said, scowled. He moved to stand next to Hannibal, leaving Will’s side.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Jack commented as he tried to view the corpse from Hannibal’s vantage point.

Will silently prodded Hannibal to speak. As if sensing the invisible push, Hannibal emitted a low sigh and let his face twist more fully into a frown.

“I have. Jack, this threatens to be a violation of doctor-patient confidentiality, so I must tread carefully.”

Jack looked at him with renewed curiosity-- and hope.

Hannibal went on, “Years ago, I treated a teenage boy who suffered from what I would describe as an identity disorder. During our therapy, he reported a moment of clarity. He understood, in that moment, he was an animal born in the body of a man. From that moment, he adopted a solitary life-- he wished to live as an animal. A predator.”

“A beast,” Jack paraphrased. “Do you know if he still lives in the area?”

Hannibal shook his head, “Sadly, I do not. Once he reached legal age, he refused further treatment. That was many years ago now.”

Jack exhaled a deep, bracing breath and said in the voice of a man asking for a significant favor, “Dr. Lecter, I know you’re in a precarious position here, but lives are at stake. I’ll defend you to whatever board of ethics questions your judgment. Will you tell me his name?”

The doctor stood with his eyes cast toward the ground, presumably weighing his moral and professional obligations. Then, as if deciding, he looked up at Jack and nodded once, a grave expression on his face.

“His name was Randall Tier.”

“Randall Tier,” Jack repeated. “Thank you, Dr. Lecter. I need to look into this. Will, thank you for coming-- I’ll let you know.”

Will and Hannibal watched as Jack stalked across the snow in the direction of the vehicles, phone pressed to his ear almost immediately. The pair headed in the opposite direction once Jack was far enough way they could be certain he had committed to pursuing this tip himself. They maintained a friendly distance between them as they approached the police line and, beyond that, a gravel parking area.

At their cars-- a pair as seemingly mismatched as their owners-- they paused.

“Was that the real name?” Will asked in a whisper.

“Of course, Will,” Hannibal answered with no sign of offense. “I gave you my word.”

Will withheld the cutting remark about how good Hannibal’s word was. He recognized that his lingering sense of anxiety was funneling into aggression. He closed his eyes, let cold air fill his chest, and pictured Hannibal asleep in an old armchair hours earlier; some of the anger ebbed at the recent memory. Perhaps he liked the other man more when he was asleep.

“Thank you,” Will said, strained.

Hannibal's mouth twisted upward in the smallest of smiles, his amusement at Will's distress apparent.

"Dinner tonight?" Hannibal asked, brightening.

Will raked a hand through his hair, exasperated and irritated and frustratingly still drawn to the man before him.

"Fine," Will replied, trying not to sound like he was as petulant as he felt at the moment.

"6:00, if you'd like to assist. I'm certain your culinary skills haven't rusted entirely," Hannibal responded. Then, clapping a hand on Will's arm in what would have looked like a friendly pat but felt like a latent claim, Hannibal walked purposefully around Will and got into his vehicle.

Will got into his own car, waited until Hannibal backed up and exited, then laid his head against his steering wheel and thought about his life.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

▨ ▨NSFW ▨ ▨

Thank you for your wonderful, considerate comments and insights! I love hearing your thoughts, and I appreciate your understanding of my weird writing schedule right now.

Will noticed something was different in his kitchen immediately. It took him only a few seconds to register the change: The conspicuous box that had sat on his kitchen table for weeks now was gone. Will heaved a sigh and wondered where this offense fell on Hannibal's scale of rudeness; he guessed that failing to properly appreciate a gift was somewhere above forgetting to send a thank you note and below over-imbibing at a dinner party. However, going through his cabinets while searching for a box of cereal, Will realized the gift hadn't been rescinded but instead dismantled and put away on Will's behalf. His bristling at the invasion was balanced by his relief that he would not likely end up on the list of Ripper victims tonight.

Will found the half-empty cereal box and poured a bowl, imagining the displeased expression Hannibal would be making as he read the ingredients list. He walked through the house eating, the dogs watching him idly. Based on their contented napping, they appeared to have been fed and given time to run the yard-- at least they had been cared for appropriately this morning. Only Zoe followed Will around the house, seeming to demand an answer as to why a stranger had been in the house and why Will had left her in said stranger's care.

Will squatted down to pet her, his spoon resting in the bowl in his other hand.

"Zoe, forgive me. You'll be friends soon," he told her in a soothing voice.

She collapsed on the floor, rolling over to show her belly. He pet her gingerly, smiling and wishing all conflict could be resolved so simply.

Bowl dumped unceremoniously in the sink, Will crawled into bed and joined the rest of his family in sleep. It wasn't until mid-afternoon when the weight of Winston thudding onto the bed brought Will back to awareness. Opening his eyes, he was greeted by Winston's wide, puppy-eyed gaze. The dog nosed at Will's shoulder, then stared at him purposefully while the man rubbed at his eyes and stretched. Dissatisfied with the sluggish response, Winston jumped off the bed, trotted to the doorway, then turned to look back at Will impatiently.

"Okay, I'm up. I get the point," Will said groggily as he rose, drawing the attention of the others who were now stirred to action as well.

Opening the door to let the gang loose, he was glad to see the sun had come out from behind the clouds even though it was still unseasonably cold for Virginia. He grabbed a hat before closing the door behind him and started on a familiar course, one that all of the dogs knew well. Will kept an extra eye on Zoe during their walk and was satisfied to find she and Ellie were inseparable in their play. Like Winston before her, Zoe was a member of the family now, learning their paces and their schedules.

Before leaving for Baltimore, Will fed the dogs and hurried through getting cleaned up. Time had become fuzzy throughout the day between the previous night's lack of sleep and the too-brief midday nap, so much so that he was almost late in leaving. Will couldn't help but think it was better this way-- less time to think and feed the lump of nervous energy collecting in his lower stomach.

He had gone through the motions of driving to Baltimore and making his way up the walk to the stately home many times before, yet standing at Hannibal's front door and waiting for an answer left Will buzzing with anticipation now-- not at what he expected to happen that evening but at what he could not possibly predict. He had the distinct sense that he'd gone sailing without a map and now was lost in a place where the ocean and horizon met, guided by the winds.

When the door opened and the man with graying blonde hair and eyes that softened when Will's image was reflected in them appeared, Will was surprised not by the danger that he was very much in every moment he spent with Hannibal but by the sheer familiarity of the image before him. Every detail-- from Hannibal's relaxed posture, casual sweater and slacks, and loose hair to the golden glow of light emanating around him from the entryway-- reminded Will of precisely why their relationship had proven addictive before it had all gone so quickly to hell in a handbasket.

The scene epitomized a solidity and certainty that were impossible in Will's life. They were easy to believe in, though, if he let himself.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal welcomed as he moved aside and let the younger man enter.

"How many syllables does our dinner have?" Will asked in reply to the greeting, not missing a beat.

Whatever had briefly ruffled Hannibal this morning must have been pushed aside because he only gave Will a politely dismissive but otherwise amused glance as a response.

"Seeking the beauty in simplicity is the next lesson. Complex meals allow a chef the luxury of error. Mastering a single dish requires undivided focus and care. That is the test tonight," the melodic voice described quickly, confidently.

"Are we discussing dinner or philosophy?" Will questioned curtly, hanging up his coat.

The corners of two full lips turned up the smallest bit more, and Hannibal answered, "Need there be a distinction? We can imagine one if it makes you more comfortable, Will."

Will turned to look the other man in the eye, a smart retort about the hazards of blurring lines on the tip of his tongue. However, at the challenging, oddly affectionate expression on Hannibal's face-- crow's feet appearing next to crinkled eyes even as his jaw tightened-- Will bit the remark back before it left his mouth. He wasn't angry with Hannibal, even if he ought to be. Honestly, he wasn't entirely sure he had any right to be bitter now, not after Clark Ingram and then the verbal dance they'd engaged in with Jack only this morning.

The ugly, frustrating truth was that Will was agitated by how, when he and Hannibal were together in these private spaces with nobody left to perform for, his chest tightened and skin hummed with crackling electricity while his muscles and harried mind relaxed. Will knew himself if only for these moments, and he felt acutely alive.

At Will's silence, Hannibal's sealed lips and tilted face maintained the air of one awaiting an insult but the almost-teasing look melted away from Hannibal's well-defined features. Will exhaled a huffing sigh, recognizing they were yet again on the cusp of engaging in a psychological and emotional clash-- Will's ire battering against Hannibal's resolved coldness.

It was not romance or yearning that caused Will to abruptly move intimately close, put one hand on the other man's waist just above the belt, and place the other firmly on his upper arm. No, in reality, Will wanted them both to shut up and quit driving the daggers deeper into their own stomachs for a few damned minutes. Touch was a language they both understood, less ambiguous than words.

Although Will originally possessed ulterior motives for reaching out to Hannibal's rigid, tightly held form, they were rapidly pushed aside as the spaces between them grew smaller, then disappeared. Will found he was still over-sensitive to touch, though not as drastically as when he and Hannibal had first crossed the lines between friendship and something more. Still, there was an intoxicating rush of heat through his core as he experienced the intimacy of hands on his back through the heavy flannel shirt he wore and the sensation of lips meeting and gradually dampening as the kiss deepened.

The caress of a tongue against his own, a hand working gently through his hair, the sound of breathing growing heavier-- these were the things that pushed all other thoughts from Will's mind, relegating them to white noise. Working of their own accord, he found his fingers were slipping beneath the sweater they had been resting against.

Just the night before, Will unequivocally stated that he and Hannibal needed time before diving back into the murky waters of a relationship. He had cut off even the possibility of physical contact. It was a smart and cautious declaration, one that Will had fully intended on maintaining. Now, less than twenty-four hours later, he had somehow navigated two bodies up a staircase with minimal pause.

With a faint grin concealed by the hard kiss being pressed against his mouth, Will absently thought it was this sort of decision-making that led Hannibal to regret not killing him.

The large, dark bedroom swallowed them as they entered the room. Will's shirt had been unbuttoned on the journey upstairs, and he let it fall off of his shoulders. The hands that had worked their way up the crimson sweater Hannibal wore helped lift the fabric over the other man's head, a short opportunity to take a few quick breaths. Undershirts were discarded,

shoes kicked off, and as mouths met again, hands moved toward belts, buttons, and zippers. There would be time for seduction or teasing or tenderness later-- it was a sheer desire to feel the familiar flesh against his own, to taste the mouth that could sting or soothe, to be touched by firm, sure hands that pressed into his own skin with need.

Remembering vividly their previous encounters, Will pulled at Hannibal's bottom lip with his teeth, not enough to break skin but enough to be felt. He heard the sound of breath catching in a throat, and Will moved them the rest of the way to the bed. From his position on top of the other man, he was able to move his teeth and lips freely from behind Hannibal's ear to his collarbone, nipping and biting and sucking a pathway of red marks. When Will's teeth cradled a particularly taut tendon stretched along the base of Hannibal's smooth neck, he felt the soft, unmistakable brush of fingertips along his length. He paused for a moment and involuntarily took a sharp breath, which he knew would not be missed by Hannibal. As either retribution or reward, Will gave one more mark-leaving bite to the sensitive stretch of throat.

So far, the apprehension Will had felt about exploring a physical relationship with a man-- the frightening newness of each sensation and the very real shift in physical power-- was absent in the face of pure sensation. But, with a quick, deft movement, Hannibal flipped their positions, and Will was jarred for just a few moments by the reminder that this was still largely uncharted territory for him and that even now, they could harm one another if either chose.

His hesitation was eased when the reason for the change became obvious, as Hannibal pressed a firm, wet kiss then moved doward on the bed. Guilt stirred in Will's stomach at the imbalance that he had worried about when they were previously together, but the feeling of warm breath on skin and then the glide of a tongue against him compelled Will's mind to go black behind his closed eyes. As he was enveloped in tight, sucking heat, he tilted his head back and released a shuddering breath. He didn't think about how annoyingly self-satisfied this would make Hannibal, focused only on the emerging rhythm and the swirls of red and black behind his closed eyelids. The continual pressure and hyper-awareness of the scene unfolding between his thighs built the pressure forming low in his body. After a few minutes, it was impossible to take a deep breath, air coming in and out in short, sharp bursts, and Will felt himself squirm under the motions of Hannibal's mouth.

Painfully close and feeling that he needed the promised release perhaps more than the air he struggled to get into his lungs, Will said Hannibal's name in a whispering, thick voice. It sounded weak-- a plea-- but that was not remotely important now. The steady, rhythmic pressure continued and spurred Will over the brink, his head pushing backward on the bed, chin raised, sighing moans escaping his lips as sweet, contracting waves whited out his mind, then brought him back to earth.

When the final spasms passed and his eyes slowly opened, Will's muscles melted into the bed, body tingling with a wash of chemical relaxation. Meeting the dark eyes that were watching him as lips laid light kisses up his stomach, Will could already sense that Hannibal was, indeed, terribly smug. Forcing himself into movement, Will caught him under the jaw and led him upward into a deep kiss, tongues again stroking gently against one another. They laid together for a moment, breath slowly returning to their bodies.

In truth, Will had decided many weeks ago, before Freddie Lounds and his world-turning realization, that he would try to be a more equal partner in their physical relationship. He disliked feeling catered to or too delicate to try something he wasn't entirely sure of yet. He had resolved, then, to set aside his very real anxieties about what it was like to provide such specific pleasure versus receive it. Now, in a moment weeks later, his determination faltered. In his post-orgasm haze he felt boneless and clear-eyed, too apt to overthink. But the glassy, blackened eyes that caught his gaze when their lips separated and the hardened flesh against his lower stomach further left no doubt to the desire still lit within the other man.

He was struck by the enormity of Hannibal's *need* for him, a feeling that manifested physically now but had come to always vibrate just beneath the facade Hannibal neatly constructed and presented to the world.

Will could end things now, and Hannibal wouldn't protest. It would be incredibly rude to impose himself on someone in such a vulgar way. It was a strangely comforting thought-- a polite monster.

Will pushed himself up and Hannibal back, a firm but not harsh movement. Hannibal's eyes scanned Will's face up and down, and seeming to find no clue as to Will's exact feelings, Hannibal started, "Will--"

But catching his gaze, Will cut him off with the word he knew would cease all further negotiations: "Please."

A closed, hungry look flashed across the older man's face, eyes intent on Will's, but he leaned back and released his hold on Will's shoulder.

Turning his eyes downward to look at the smooth, lightly tan skin as he moved across it, Will thought once more of the power of words in Hannibal's mind. Will was completely certain that if there was something he had reservations about, no amount of "please" and "thank you" would sway him. It was another difference between them that both mattered and did not. He also took this opportunity that might be construed as foreplay to summon whatever nerve he could as his anxiety mounted.

He wanted to do this. Well, he thought, he wanted *to be able* to do this. He'd reserve judgment about the act itself.

Will most certainly did not want to grimace or frown or make some accidental noise of disapproval; he couldn't imagine what that might communicate to the man who was most assuredly still watching him hawkishly. He also did not want to commit some more mortifying misstep that might result in utter embarrassment.

He pressed his lips to a hip, letting the feel of flesh on flesh chip away the tiniest shard of nervousness.

Will did not fully believe he would be able to follow through with his intended course until he did. While at first incredibly awkward and raising questions that Will did not currently have the capacity to even vaguely consider, after some moments, he began to understand. From his vantage point, he could hear every throaty sound, glimpse the lost, closed-eyed

expression, and feel each small, involuntary movement of the man who normally regulated all facets of his life with exacting control.

Power was the appeal.

Some time later, the men dressing in the dimly-lit room, Will casually remarked, “You didn’t answer my question.”

Hannibal looked at him inquiringly, equally loose and light at the moment.

“What are we cooking?”

With a hint of a smile as he straightened his sleeves, Hannibal replied, “Venison medallions with balsamic duxelles. Clean, savory, and a note of iron. The meat is served rare, medium rare at most. Do you prefer to prepare the meat or the mushrooms, Will?”

A cold chill ran through Will at the prospect of burning any protein in Hannibal’s kitchen.

“Mushrooms,” he quickly answered and rose from the edge of the bed where he was tying his shoes.

In the kitchen, Hannibal and Will stood side-by-side at the island, two recipe cards and an assortment of ingredients laid before them. Reading through the recipe, Will envisioned the steps, walking through them in his mind before enacting them. The sounds of cooking-- the quick chopping of knives, the dull thud of meat being turned and salted, the clatter of glass bowls being lifted and emptied into pans-- coalesced into a familiar symphony. Will had enjoyed cooking alongside Hannibal in the past-- he appreciated how the man more or less let him be, offering tips or suggestions but not micromanaging his work. Even now, feeling rusty at cooking anything more elaborate than trout, Will received only sparse direction: “Add the balsamic to taste; the mushrooms vary by season...try the sherry from the cupboard instead...the thyme can cook longer than the parsley...excellent consistency...”

Will did notice, however, that this direction tended to be given from directly over his shoulder, Hannibal’s exhales brushing against his skin. He had no one but himself to blame.

As promised, the dish was fairly simple by Hannibal’s standards, especially with two people sharing the workload. They finished without engaging in conversation, but the silence was companionable, no sense of discomfort or strain lingering. Will tried not to wonder how long it would be before one of them upset the balance they had briefly achieved.

Pushing the premature worry away, he set the table while Hannibal plated. This, too, required no discussion or planning. Likewise, Will knew that after dinner, he would wash dishes and Hannibal would dry them and put them away neatly in whatever organizational system he had developed in his pristine cupboards and shelves. He didn’t know he had missed these small rituals that, in the past, grounded them even when all else between them was uncertain.

As he finished laying the silverware out, Will shook his head at himself, embarrassed at the terribly dull, domestic patterns he had latched onto yet also entertained by how sharply they juxtaposed with other parts of each man's life.

Over dinner, they discussed what would pass as normal matters: Hannibal detailed a journal article he was writing that was ostensibly about diagnosing sociopathy in adolescents with co-occurring disorders but was mostly a rebuke of a piece Frederick Chilton had penned. Will told the story of how Zoe had come to join the family and complained about his students' atrocious observational skills. Will sensed Hannibal's lack of prodding into Will's mind and failure to contemplate the nature of the universe was a reprieve-- perhaps parole for good behavior.

For a few hours, Will didn't think himself into a black pit or spit acerbic comments like acid. It was no less dangerous for him to relax as he did, but holding a wine glass in his hand and listening to Hannibal describe Chilton's piece with poorly veiled contempt, he couldn't find the energy to care.

When Will left that evening, eyes looking out at the dark horizon, he wondered if the sky and the sea had ever been separate or if he had misunderstood them both.

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all for reading (even after 30+ chapters) and for your wonderful comments. This is a shorter, quicker chapter, but I'm hoping to maybe get another one knocked out this weekend. We'll see 😁 😁 😁

On Monday morning, Will ventured to the lab, two cups of coffee in his hands. The weekend left him feeling equal parts relaxed and dismayed. He needed to feel grounded and attached to the real world-- the world everyone but Hannibal Lecter occupied-- once more. For Will, few people provided him with that as well as Beverly Katz and her persistent, frighteningly normal attempts at friendship. She would accept the coffee and thank him without inserting a single metaphor or nugget of theology.

A few steps into the lab, however, Will stopped.

A cantaloupe rested in the center of the stainless steel table, the harsh BAU lab lights absorbed by its rough, matte surface. For a moment, Will thought he was hallucinating it-- a parting gift from his encephalitis, perhaps. He noticed Beverly standing to the side of the table and cast a questioning look in her direction; he received a smile in return, an assurance of reality.

“Beverly…” Will started, inquisitive, then fell quiet as he walked toward her and offered her the coffee.

“Ah, caffeine,” she said in thanks, and took a sip. She glanced at Will with an amused half-smile and began to explain. “We’re going to--”

But before she could go any further, Price and Zeller came busily into the main lab space, buzzing with discussion. In Zeller’s hands was a clear, plastic container with a bear skull inside. They paused a moment at Will’s presence; Zeller’s smile fell while Price’s brightened.

“Want to see something neat?” Jimmy asked, continuing toward the table.

Zeller followed him silently and placed the container on the table next to the melon. Price opened the box and lifted the skull out with nothing short of glee. Out of the container, Will could see this wasn’t another fossil borrowed from the natural history museum for reference-- this was a mechanized skull, teeth sharpened and metal gleaming at the jaw hinges.

“Randall Tier?” Will questioned, taking a few steps closer. It was precisely as he’d imagined it, though there was substantially more blood stained into the ivory bone in his version.

“No, the other guy killing people in a bear suit,” Zeller replied acerbically, taking the fruit into his hands as he spoke.

Will’s eyes darted to Zeller’s and burned into him over the top of his glasses until the other man looked away. Jimmy, meanwhile, was busy affixing the skull contraption to a stand and attaching some sort of tube to a place behind the jaw.

“Okay, melon me,” Price said enthusiastically, standing up straight.

Zeller carefully positioned the cantaloupe so that it was balanced on the open bottom jaw, the top fangs just grazing the surface.

“Is this supposed to simulate a human skull?” Will inquired doubtfully, his tone leaving no uncertainty about whether this question was genuine or a veiled critique.

The two men double-checking the set-up looked upward at him with the eyes of children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“Yes,” Jimmy answered hesitantly as Brian simultaneously said, “Sure.”

A few feet away from the table, Beverly gave a disbelieving laugh.

“No. We’re testing the spring mechanism. This wasn’t the skull Tier used to kill with-- he had a few suits in progress.”

“My mother used to say it was always better to be overdressed,” Jimmy piped in, grabbing a hand control attached to the tube.

“And the cantaloupe…?” Will asked with his eyes widening.

“We need to do a trial run with the skull using something that provides resistance before we start lab testing for Jack,” Zeller answered flatly.

Will could almost feel Beverly’s disbelief as she crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her weight to one side, her hip jutting slightly in a pose Will was sure she’d perfected through listening impatiently to her younger sister’s excuses for decades. She didn’t need to verbally call out their flimsy excuse to watch a bear skull crush a cantaloupe during work hours.

“Here we go,” Jimmy grinned as he took a few steps backward.

A mechanical sound came from the rigged skull followed by a rapid, harsh crack as the jaws split the cantaloupe and pieces of melon were sent flying.

Price and Zeller laughed and rushed forward to examine the damage.

However, the sound of the lab door opening and heavy footfalls approaching the group dampened their joy, and they pulled their faces into impressions of solemn neutrality.

“Hey, Jack,” Zeller choked out.

Jack's eyes were wide and his nostrils flared.

"What the hell is this?" he questioned.

"We're testing the spring mechanism," Jimmy echoed Beverly's earlier words.

"We needed resistance," Zeller added weakly.

Jack put a hand to his forehead, closed his eyes for a moment, and looked like he was doing all he could to avoid unleashing his fury on the utter idiots before him.

"Over the next two months, we have three very public multiple homicide cases going before grand juries. We do not have time for this," Jack snapped, voice angry but controlled.

Waiting for Crawford's yelling was almost as scary as the yelling itself.

"I came here to ask when bite force testing for the Tier case would be finished. Since you have free time, I suppose it can be finished today. Nobody goes home until those reports are on my desk," Jack barked. Then, smoothing his jacket and setting his jaw, he concluded, "I have a meeting. This--" he pointed at the mess "needs to be gone before I come back."

Nothing less than fuming, Jack turned on his heel, shoved the glass door open too harshly, and left the lab silent in his wake.

The four stood without speaking for a few seconds. Jimmy broke the silence.

"I'll get the towels."

As Price and Zeller went into motion cleaning, Will came to stand next to Beverly, his gaze still on the razor-like fangs dripping with juice.

"Jack is extra *Jack* today," Will observed.

"Hard to blame him," Beverly replied.

Will raised his brow, and Beverly's friendly face dropped into a small frown.

"Bella. She's chosen to stop chemo," Beverly supplied in a low voice.

A pang struck Will's chest, catching his breath and compelling him to look down at the ground. He swallowed down his guilt at forgetting, yet again, that Jack went from murderers to a dying wife each day.

"How'd you find out?" he asked Beverly, a question he didn't care about the answer to but that seemed right to ask at the time.

Beverly cocked her head to the side consideringly and raised her eyebrows slightly in a look that suggested there was more to the story than Will knew.

“Miriam Lass,” Beverly answered, then went on, “she’s staying with Jack and Bella this term. Helps in the lab sometimes. Field work isn’t in the cards for her anymore.”

Will turned his head to look at Beverly, shock causing his mouth to open and close slightly as he fumbled to find the words. For a split second, his chest swelled with borrowed pride at the thought of a young woman with unimaginable potential sitting in Quantico classrooms again, but this feeling was tailed and deflated by the sting of the cold blade of uneasiness in his stomach.

She was amazing because she was the only survivor of the Chesapeake Ripper, and now, she was dangerous because she was the only survivor of the Chesapeake Ripper.

“She came back,” Will said, not able to sound anything other than impressed in spite of his growing discomfort. “She said she would.”

“She’s tough,” Beverly commented. “That’s why she and Jack get along.”

“Jack sees himself in Miriam, including his failures,” Will remarked, saying more than he meant.

Beverly did not react, only sighed.

“Before Miriam, I wanted us to catch the Chesapeake Ripper because he’s *the Chesapeake Ripper.* Now, I want us to catch him for her. She deserved better,” Beverly told Will earnestly. Her lips formed a straight, tight line, and Will could see she was thinking of each time the team had failed to find the Ripper.

The blade twisted deeper in his gut.

Without an ounce of dishonesty, Will responded, “She did. So does Jack.”

Will felt a hand land softly on his shoulder blade, drawing his eyes upward to Beverly’s. She was examining him-- Will knew that look-- and he wondered for only a split second if she could read in his face the truth of his guilt.

“Don’t beat yourself up for not knowing about Bella. Jack doesn’t make it easy. You’re allowed to have a life outside of this place,” she assured him, friendlier and warmer than Will deserved.

He nodded, pushing down the bleak laugh that struggled to escape his throat.

Eager to exit the conversation before he thought himself into an even darker place than he was already approaching, Will asked, “Which cases are going to the grand jury?”

Beverly’s eyes darted across his face at this quick shift of topics, but the softness there suggested she attributed it to lingering shame for not knowing how much closer Bella had come to the end of her life.

“Larry Wells is up next week. Randall Tier will be eventually, but not for a few months at least. Jack says two, I say four minimum. The one that has Jack worried is Peter

Bernardone," Beverly said matter-of-factly.

"Why?" Will pushed, his voice hinting at his investment in the man's future.

"The evidence is too circumstantial, and Alana's psych evaluation isn't going to help his case," Beverly answered with a shrug.

"I can't say I'm disappointed," Will replied, his shoulders relaxing a bit at the news and the old affection he always had for Alana Bloom striking in his chest. "Peter should never have been arrested."

"You remember his social worker, Clark Ingram? The guy we interviewed?" Beverly asked, and the tension returned with a vengeance. Will nodded confirmation. "He's disappeared."

Will raised an eyebrow and scoffed, "Convenient timing."

"That's what I said," Beverly agreed, much to Will's relief. "He'll turn up eventually."

The duo stood and watched Price and Zeller clean cantaloupe off of the weaponized skull, the humor not lost on either Will or Beverly. After a long moment, though, the acidic mix of feelings in Will's stomach gnawed through his defenses and made him search for an out.

"I have papers to grade," he said abruptly, trying to sound apologetic.

Beverly smirked and coolly replied, "When you're done being social, you can just leave. You don't need an excuse."

Will felt a blush rise in his face, and he gave a single, awkward laugh.

"There really are essays. But thanks," he answered.

Beverly tossed him a smile as he left, and at the look, Will felt both less concerned about his own fate and more doubtful of his convoluted allegiances.

On the way to his classroom, Will cleaned his glasses, an easy excuse to avoid people's eyes. Not that people expected him to look at them anymore, but it was still better to have a reason. He thought of Miriam and, by extension, Hannibal, and his face felt hot, so he kept it turned downward. Miriam was a blind spot-- what else had been a blind spot?-- in Will's estimation of Hannibal Lecter. In the abstract, Will knew what Hannibal was capable of; more concretely, Will had seen Ripper crime scenes in photographs as well as in person. He studied them, picked them apart and put them together again. He lectured on them, poured over them at his desk during the day and in bed at night. They were horrible and beautiful, just as was their creator. But Miriam Lass was different: Hannibal kept her alive, took her arm, and released her for unfathomable reasons. To torment Jack? Out of a sadist's version of respect? Will hadn't wanted to know, so he hadn't allowed himself to think of it-- of her. Now, though, it was impossible to avoid. Whatever Hannibal had done, he'd ensured Miriam would not identify him.

It worried and infuriated Will, but it also garnered a darker intrigue, one that asked questions Will needed, but didn't want, to have answered.

In the safety of his classroom, Will tried in vain to grade midterms, but after leaving the first few papers with enough red on them that they may as well have been diagrams of arterial spray, he pushed the stack aside. He needed to understand as much as he could before seeing Hannibal again.

Without giving himself too much time to think, he booted up his computer and turned on the overhead projector. Will had given himself too many allowances, so it was time to test his mettle.

Will navigated to a slideshow presentation on the Chesapeake Ripper. He used it with his first-semester trainee classes as an exercise in observation and finding patterns across seemingly unrelated killings. No two Ripper bodies were disposed of in the same way; the organs removed-- another fuzzy spot in Will's image of Hannibal that needed to be clarified-- were seemingly chosen at random; the method of execution ranged from nearly painless to torturous. The slideshow featured only photos withheld from the media-- the images so gory and invasive that prosecuting attorneys would warn family members to look away before their presentation at trial. The students needed to see the reality of field work; if they couldn't withstand these images, they would never be able to examine a decomposing corpse pulled from a riverbed. More importantly, though, the trainees needed to look beyond the shock to see the methodology. Will had failed more than one student based on the trainee's blind insistence that one-- or more-- of the murders did not belong to the Ripper.

Yet, although Will had seen these photos countless times, he'd never seen Hannibal in them. Never allowed himself to see Hannibal in them.

He should have.

Will settled in the first row of seats, clicker in hand. He leaned back in a mimicry of relaxation and went to the first slide: A man's body sat in a pew with a copy of the Bible laid open next to him, his tongue placed as the bookmark. Will surveyed the image, then he closed his eyes and held the photograph in his mind.

He placed himself in the back row of the doomed church and watched the scene unfold.

The church was shadowy in the middle of the night. The victim, a significant patron of the church, was dragged from the rooms behind the altar-- backstage, Hannibal might consider it-- by a familiar form. Gloved hands hauled the body to the pew, arranged it in prayer. Gold and silver hair glinted in the moonlight as Hannibal rose, his burden disposed of. Then, in smooth strides, Hannibal disappeared into the storage rooms; he returned with a tongue wrapped in plastic. He plucked the Bible from the altar-- not one of the ones left for general use-- and arranged the tongue in the crease. The book was placed carefully by the body, and Hannibal's dark, keen eyes observed the image and compared it to the one he must have smuggled into the church in his mind. He adjusted the man's wrinkled collar, smiled in the small way he does when he looks at a perfectly plated meal, and was absorbed into the darkness without a second glance back.

Blue eyes flitted open and returned to the projected image. It was more elegant in person. But one thing was amiss in Will's detailed imagining: The man's kidney was missing even though

strangulation was the cause of death. When Hannibal left, he had an organ tucked away in his coat or in one of his hand-stitched bags.

The bag, Will recalled, Hannibal used to tote goods from the gourmet grocery stores he frequents. The bags he used to bring meals to the hospital for an FBI agent with a half-boiled brain.

Will clicked again.

Andrew Caldwell, a physician, was found severed in half, top and bottom placed side-by-side on a school bus. A cold chill ran down the back of Will's spine as he envisioned Hannibal arranging the other doctor inside the bright, yellow vehicle. Caldwell had been alive when he was cut in half. Did he beg for his life? If he did, would Hannibal have ignored him? Mocked him? Will wondered what Andrew Caldwell did to earn him so much more brutal a death than his predecessor.

The heart and liver were taken.

Will clicked again.

The body of Jeremy Olmstead impaled by several tools slid onto the screen.

Hannibal would have had to put his weight into inserting the tools into the body, severing muscles and organs. He would have known the exact places to insert the items from Olmstead's workshop to ensure they would penetrate cleanly through the body, though-- and he knew how to keep Olmstead alive until he chose to kill him. Olmstead died from blood loss after many hours of suffering.

This time, the liver was once again taken, as was the thymus gland.

The choice of trophies had always seemed odd to investigators. None of the items would preserve terribly well, and they were not quick to remove. Will, himself, had toyed with the idea that the removal of the organs was, in part, a display of surgical knowledge or a boast about how carefully planned the kills were. Picturing Hannibal in the scenes, Will faltered. Hannibal was dramatic and more than a little self-congratulatory, but he also had a reason behind each murder. Will didn't know what those reasons were, but he knew they existed somewhere in the catacombs of Hannibal's mind. The organs, then, had a reason for being removed as well.

Kidney, heart, liver, thymus.

Kidney, heart, liver, thymus.

Kidney, heart, liver, thymus.

Offal.

Sweetbreads.

Will felt the veracity of his thoughts before he could fully process them. His hands went numb and cold. The world spun, then darkened for a moment, and he took several deep breaths, head leaned back on the seat.

When his vision returned, he took off his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes, a buffet of ornate meals lined up on display in his memory.

Will couldn’t distinguish if he was in a state of shock or if he’d known this all along.

He clicked again.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

> I finally felt halfway rested and sane this weekend, so I'm just about ecstatic that I got another chapter out. I enjoyed writing it, and I hope you enjoy reading it! As much as I like my angst, I kinda love having the possibility of some fluff back on the table (even if it's not really, totally here).
>
> As always, thank you all for being wonderful! 💗 💗 💗 💗

Rows of eyes reflected the glare of the projector screen.

Will recalled the eight months when he and his father inhabited one of their worst houses, a rental with the gutters falling off that was at least five miles from another soul. At night, Will's father could turn off the porch lights and send the yard into inky blackness until Will's eyes adjusted and he could see by the starlight. Will's father, however, liked to remind him they were not alone in the stretch of woods: He would shine a flashlight into the yard, making it sparkle with the glowing eyes of wolf spiders. Will, little more than nine at the time, was fascinated and terrified by the phenomenon-- he had a feeling of seeing into another world, perhaps more real than his own, and finding confirmation that there truly were monsters waiting at his doorstep. His father, a practical man whose energies were directed at boats instead of *coddling* his sensitive son, laughed and told Will, "They're more afraid of you than you are of them."

At nine, Will doubted his father's wisdom; at thirty-six, he felt the truth of it in his bones.

"Why do serial killers typically select victims of the same race and socioeconomic status?" he asked in the gruff voice the students were accustomed to but still intimidated by.

Eyes shined back at him in the dark. Some turned away abruptly, directed at pages of notes that did not hold the answer to the question.

A student, something Parker, raised his hand. Will wondered absently if he raised his hand in any of his other classes and acknowledged him with raised brows.

"They identify with the victims and find the murders more satisfying because they can relate to them," the young voice offered.

Will huffed a harsh exhale and responded, "Almost therapeutic." He paused, and the class held its collective breath. "Tell me, Mr. Parker, what part of himself did Ted Bundy see in Donna Manson? Or Georgeann Hawkins?"

The student chose not to reply.

“Killers do not exist in a vacuum,” Will resumed speaking. “The contexts of their lives and societies shape their choices. Law enforcement is at a disadvantage because we are forced to work backward from the moment their compulsion becomes violence to the day they first felt the desire to take life. This could be a traumatic event or injury. It could be the day they were born. We’ll leave that to your abnormal psychology professor to examine.”

The students had begun to breathe again as Will’s volume lowered from just below a shout to almost normal.

“For Thursday’s class, you will write a one-page paper exploring the question of why serial killers often select victims who are demographically similar to themselves. If you find an unlikely gem of insight on the internet, you must cite your source or you will fail this assignment.”

The glowing eyes disappeared as the students furiously etched notes.

Sitting back against his desk, Will concluded into the dark classroom, “If you have questions, you know my office hours and email address. You’re dismissed.”

The sound of bags and papers rustling filled the air; nobody tended to linger in Professor Graham’s classroom. As the students made their way out the door, they cleared a pathway for Alana Bloom to enter.

Will took off his glasses, placed them next to him on the desk, and rubbed his tired eyes. When he reopened them, Alana was giving him a vaguely concerned half-smile-- a look he knew well on her face.

“Haven’t seen you in a while, Will,” Alana said as a greeting.

“Could say the same for you,” Will answered, his tone stinging. He immediately regretted it-- didn’t know why his brain had chosen it now-- and softened his response, “I’ve been busy.”

Alana remained unperturbed, though perhaps a bit less friendly. She took a seat in the chair near his desk but not too near his body.

“I’ve heard. There have been some fascinating cases lately. Jack must keep you busy,” she remarked.

“Fascinating,” Will intoned. “Every serial killer on the Eastern seaboard has chosen this winter to put themselves on the FBI’s radar.”

Alana smiled again at the dark version of events.

“Then Jack picked the right time to recruit you,” she said smoothly, the thinly veiled compliment causing Will to shift on the table and replace his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

Diverting attention from himself, Will added, “I understand he ensures your job security as well.”

A thoughtful sigh came from Alana's chest, and she leaned back and crossed her legs in the posture of a woman just tired enough to need a moment of quiet but nowhere near the point of exhaustion. Will envied her that.

"You were involved with the Peter Bernardone case. You thought he was innocent; no one else did," Alana stated matter-of-factly. Will appreciated that quality-- cutting straight to the point instead of dancing around it until they no longer knew what it was. "We shouldn't discuss anything that might color your testimony."

"Of course," Will agreed flatly, acutely aware of the fact that Alana only mentioned his memory being tainted.

"Like if I found in my psychological evaluation the combination of Peter Bernardone's traumatic brain injury and anxiety-induced neurological atypicalities all but definitively preclude him from being able to plan, execute, and hide over a dozen murders," Alana said steadily, prompting Will to meet her gaze. "That would be information someone in your position shouldn't know."

In that moment, for only a glimmer of a second, Will remembered how beautiful Alana Bloom was, dark hair and fair skin outside and a rod of steel running down her spine.

Affecting casualness but maintaining eye contact, Will replied, "That would be entirely inappropriate for me to know, no matter how grateful I would be."

A slight but wholly genuine smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and Alana returned it, then looked away. Will did the same, recognizing uncomfortably how often their friendship edged to the very precipice of flirtation. A jealous, ugly voice that he recognized as his own sounded in his mind: *How often did Alana and Hannibal's friendship do the same?*

Will felt his face heat at thinking of Hannibal and Alana still remaining friendly-- which was entirely likely. After all, they went to the same theater performances, socialized in the same circles, attended *galas* together. Will could feel his cheeks flushing with embarrassment and the juvenile. swell of petty, irrational anger. He had never been a jealous man, but if Hannibal insisted on claiming every inch of Will's thoughts-- and body-- as his own, Will would be damned if he didn't do the same.

"Have you seen Abigail recently?" Alana asked, her voice muted behind the rush of blood in Will's ears.

Her words made his stomach drop and forcefully swiped away the anger, replacing it with remorse.

"I haven't," Will answered her, breaking eye contact. "You?"

Alana nodded.

"I'm still her therapist. I see her once a week. She's okay," Alana said simply.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Will lamely replied. A long pause passed that told him Alana would wait for an explanation. He crossed his arms over his chest and spoke to the ground, “She doesn’t need me-- she’s almost an adult. She’s had enough fathering for one lifetime.”

Will glanced at Alana and saw her mouth was drawn into a slight frown but she didn’t appear ready to argue. Her eyes were wider, sadder than before. For a few seconds, she watched Will and measured her reaction.

Exhaling audibly and seeming to settle on her words, Alana said, “It’s painful to neglect your own needs for someone else’s. Abigail might appreciate that one day; she might not. You’re doing the right thing.”

Will swallowed hard through a constricting throat. It felt like he was losing something-- albeit something he never had.

Strained and quieter, he questioned, “Is Jack going to charge her with Nicholas Boyle’s murder?”

Alana shook her head as she vehemently replied, “No, thank god. Questioning was a bust-- like we told him it would be. He still thinks she’s involved, but he’s too busy with real murderers now to keep harassing Abigail.”

“Good,” Will stated firmly. “She deserves a fresh start.”

“She’ll get one. I’ll make sure she does,” Alana promised, her decisive voice putting muscle behind her words. “College is only a few months away now-- she’s going out of state. She never could have done that if her father was still alive.”

It was a weak condolence, but Will appreciated the effort. He conjured the image of Abigail on a college quad-- laughing, throat healed, face bathed in sunshine, and surrounded by friends who only knew her as a quirky girl from the Midwest. He savored the image and the sliver of hope it gave him, and his hold on the version of Abigail created in Will’s own image faded that much more into his memory. She would grow up to be a person Will didn’t recognize and had no hand in creating beyond the one moment their lives intersected spectacularly, and that was the best thing for Abigail Hobbs.

“How’s life beyond the FBI?” Alana inquired in a lighter, friendlier tone.

Will tried not to look like the proverbial deer in the headlights at this ostensibly easy question.

“I got a new dog,” he responded, gripping onto the fact in the sea of much more fraught information rattling around his head. “Zoe. Found her on the side of the road-- almost got into an accident.”

Alana laughed and smiled broadly at the image.

“Is it seven now?” she asked.

Will nodded, grinning at the thought of his dogs. His momentary reprieve was cut short by Alana's next question, though.

"Does your new...friend...get along with them? She must, right? Unless that's fizzled since we last talked," Alana chose her words carefully and guarded her tone. It was purposefully airy and indifferent.

The quiet between them lasted a beat too long. He hoped she chalked it up to his usual social awkwardness.

"My dogs like everyone," Will hedged.

Alana chuckled and, with a sidelong glance, commented, "I get it. Will Graham is a private man. Not my business."

Will sighed wearily, relieved but aware of how misleading his silence was. He was also painfully reminded of his own jealousy only minutes before-- it felt even more unjustified in light of his utter inability to acknowledge the complex but decidedly real relationship he had with Hannibal.

"What about you?" Will asked, dodging further inquiry.

Alana's eyes widened and a disbelieving look crossed her face.

"Do you remember Dr. Sutcliffe? Donald? I know you weren't in the best state when he was caring for you…" she trailed off. "He found my email address on Georgetown's website. He asked me out *through my work email.*" Alana shook her head and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"What'd you say?" Will ask unnecessarily.

"I respectfully declined," Alana responded, a trace of pink betrayed her lingering embarrassment. "His pretentiousness outweighs his merit. But maybe your luck will rub off on me if we spend more time together."

"I hope not," Will replied through a dry laugh.

As Alana launched into a complaint about how quickly Frederick Chilton had recovered from Abel Gideon's field surgery and gone straight back to his old, pompous self, Will silently speculated at the intensity of Alana's wrath.

Wednesday night came as swiftly and as slowly as it always did, the days passing quickly but the hours before arriving in Baltimore trudging along.

Will tried to plan what he wanted to say-- how he would approach the topic of honest-to-god cannibalism without ending up as dinner himself. The thought unsettled him in spite of the fact he didn't truly believe Hannibal would kill him that evening. It would lack the appropriate drama.

Will spoke aloud to himself, scrapped his original ideas, revised, practiced again, then quit and decided he would wing it. Hannibal would see through any plans Will made anyhow.

It was a precarious place he found himself navigating: Will was disgusted yet understood-- the organs of the unworthy were made beautiful in Hannibal's kitchen just as their bodies were in the wider world. He did not imagine tonight as the end of their consuming, spiraling relationship-- *But if not this, what would be the end? Could there exist a conclusion other than death?*-- but he demanded honesty all the same. His initial cold outrage had been replaced slowly since Monday by indignance: There had not been a Ripper murder since Will chose to reenter Hannibal's life, and thus, the other man had been skating by on the technicality of not lying to Will *now.*

The slippery nature of the truth slid through Will's mind as he knocked heavily on the door to the Baltimore home.

Seconds later, Hannibal appeared in the doorway, casual in dark slacks and a white and blue pinstripe shirt. Will anticipated this informality; it was Hannibal's version of breaking out a fine China Will would actually appreciate. Hannibal's sleeves were rolled neatly up to his elbows, and his collar was open just enough for Will to be unable to avoid noticing the nearly-healed bruise at the base of his throat. The physical appearance of Hannibal in Will's world was always somewhat unsettling-- like seeing a person he'd believed he'd only dreamed-- but the visual reminder of their very recent physical intimacy briefly caused all higher functioning in Will's brain to flicker, then cease.

Will huffed and let himself in, Hannibal cheerily greeting, "Good evening, Will," as he crossed the threshold.

"I suppose so," Will replied coldly as he removed his coat. Flustered more than he liked, Will turned on his heel and met Hannibal's unworried eyes. Trying not to growl, he declared, "We need to have a conversation."

"I do so enjoy those," Hannibal deftly responded, equal parts affable and taunting.

Will made his way to the kitchen without another word, forcing Hannibal to follow him.

Standing on either side of the island, the men looked into one another's eyes, gauging emotional states and proneness to violence.

Diplomacy never being a strength, Will put his hands down on the island, leaned forward with tense shoulders, and asked in a rough voice, "How did you choose which organs to take?"

Hannibal studied Will's face, but his expression did not go blank. It was a gift Will didn't know he'd accept until it was offered.

"You tell me," Hannibal challenged. "Or is there another question you meant to ask, Will?"

"The organs weren't trophies. You ate them. *We* ate them," Will lifted a hand to his forehead. "It must have been extremely satisfying to feed us your victims."

Hannibal looked down at Will's hand still placed on the island. His eyes darkened in thought and his cheeks tightened, the first glimpses of defensiveness.

"Yes, but not for the reasons you think," he said vaguely.

"Try me."

Will's harsh tone brought Hannibal's eyes back to his own.

A moment of silence passed, long and uneasy.

"To create beauty where there was none before-- one could devote his life to the endeavor. I make beautiful things for those who deserve them," Hannibal spoke without a note of regret. No apologies skirted the edges of his sentiments.

"You elevate. I understand that-- I've *lectured* on the topic," Will spoke brusquely and quickly, not willing to recognize the weight of his haphazard admission. "But what do you mean-- those who deserve them?"

The hint of a smile pulled at the edges of Hannibal's eyes, pissing Will off as much as he was grateful for the deescalation.

"You and I are alike in our appreciation of the world's beauty, though one might argue we perceive it differently," Hannibal explained. Will sensed there was a backhanded compliment in his statement but let it go. Hannibal continued, "We don't question why a tiger eats a boar-- it is his right. This is ours."

"Tigers don't eat their own," Will argued, though the force behind his words was waning. From a predator's eye, Hannibal's logic was sound; Will wasn't sure what sort of animal he himself was, but he sensed it was closer to Hannibal's breed than Clark Ingram's.

"I've chosen not to eat you, Will. The center holds."

For a surreal moment, Will considered the fact that he was losing an argument about the ethics of cannibalism.

"I'd like to know what-- or who-- I'm eating," Will plainly stated. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "And why."

The infuriating smile that had started subtly at Hannibal's eyes raised the corners of his lips in a small, closed-mouth expression of satisfaction.

"A fair request," he conceded. "Perhaps our next meal will appeal to more than your appetite."

Then, as though they had not just been debating eating human flesh, Hannibal came around the island, withdrew two aprons from a drawer, and handed one to Will.

"Sadly, tonight our entree is salmon, so I cannot tell you what his sins were," he slyly said as he tied the apron around his waist.

Will shot him a look but didn't offer a rebuttal.

As they cooked side-by-side, Will felt the hair on the back of his neck stand at how exceedingly *right* Hannibal made the most horrible acts seem. He gilded them in intricate philosophy and the certainty of a man who shaped his life around the theology of an unbothered, volatile god. Yet, even when the sheen of artifice dropped and all that was left was hands around a throat or meat on a fork, his claims felt truer than any truth Will had ever known.

The chill in Will's stomach, meanwhile, came entirely from his own inclination to accept-- and participate in-- so uniquely shaping the world.

Hannibal was skillfully slicing a shallot into razor-thin slices when Will's mind twined together the day's disparate threads.

"Hannibal?"

The man halted entirely, amber eyes rising to meet Will's.

The words that left Will's mouth were not planned or even expected, and Will believed there must have been something in his own eyes that communicated that because for only a fraction of a second, he would have sworn Hannibal looked concerned.

"Do you still see Abigail Hobbs?"

The older man remained motionless, knife still in hand. His eyes weren't on it, though-- they were still fixed on Will.

"Yes, from time to time. You don't."

The words were factual, not accusatory.

Will didn't speak for many seconds, still unsure what precisely he meant to say.

His voice was even but firm when he finally said, "She's going to college in the fall. Out of state. A normal life. Let her go."

Hannibal resumed chopping but more slowly, eyes on the cutting board but his actions clearly disconnected from his thoughts.

"Because it's the right thing to do?" he asked sardonically, brow even and tight.

The words rolled over Will's lips without hesitation: "No, because I'm asking you to."

The chopping paused again, but Hannibal did not look up.

"Are we bargaining?" he inquired, not moving a muscle.

Will shook his head.

“No, we’re not. It’s important to me that Abigail Hobbs has a choice in who she becomes. I can’t ensure that alone,” Will finished deliberately.

When Hannibal looked up and placed the knife on the board, his expression was softer, more relaxed than it had been seconds before.

“Shakespeare’s plays are rightfully revered, but I prefer his sonnets. Humanity’s stories are told in moments, not acts; our feelings are molded by the present as much as the past.”

Will listened to the silky, deep voice speak and relaxed at the warmth in the tone.

Hannibal resumed his task. As he chopped, he quoted, “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.” Turning the knife upside down, he slid the gauzy shallot into a glass bowl. Grabbing a stalk of celery and not looking up, he added, “I’ll respect your wishes.”

As Will laid out the rosemary, he quietly but sincerely replied, “Thank you, Hannibal.”

The sound of rapid, expert chopping filled the air, but through the noise came the words, “You’re welcome, Will.”

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

> A day later than I intended, but a new chapter is here! Thank you all for reading, commenting, and being wonderful. It's so, so, so very appreciated. I love seeing your thoughts on each chapter and hope it adds a little fun to your day!
>
> P.S. We're still in a period of semi-fluff, and I'm not sorry.

In an oversized martini glass, two olives speared on a toothpick bobbed just above the pinkish white tendrils that were once Cal Barnett's vocal cords. The rest of Barnett's body was positioned to sit in a folding chair, his mouth stitched neatly shut but his glazed eyes wide open. The macabre cocktail was perched on a cardboard moving box serving as a side table. These were the only things in the deserted dining room of Barnett's home.

"Dr. Cal Barnett," Jack pronounced into the empty space. Without emotion, he explained, "Movers came for the final load this morning and couldn't get in. Called his wife, and she found him like this. No signs of forced entry, but Mrs. Barnett reported the back door was unlocked when she arrived."

"Looks like he was killed last night," Zeller observed.

"Fresh," Jimmy added without looking up from the clipboard he was writing on. "Although those muscles might be a little pickled."

Will dragged a hand over his mouth but didn't look away.

"It's the Ripper," he stated without prompting.

Zeller made a disapproving noise from somewhere behind Will.

Will exhaled harshly through his nose as he half-turned his head and responded, "He garnished a cocktail with vocal cords."

"This is amateur hour compared to Freddie Lounds," Zeller commented with a confidence Will knew stemmed more from antagonism than expertise.

Will set his jaw and thought about the expression Hannibal's face would make if he knew Brian Zeller called his work amateur. Or, rather, the total lack of expression that would settle across his sharp features and the coldness that would dull his brown eyes.

"He's got a point, Will," Jack weakly agreed. Will could tell he wasn't swayed by either man yet. "Serial murderers tend to escalate in their kills. This is not an escalation."

“Freddie Lounds was a statement. This is...repugnance,” Will stated certainly but carefully, choosing his words thoughtfully.

Jack looked from Will to the body to Zeller and then back to Will again.

“I want you to *look*,” Jack ordered in a level voice.

“I *am* looking, Jack,” Will argued back spitefully.

That was his entire purpose in the FBI-- to venture where others couldn’t and see what crept in those opaque shadows. Will knew intimately what he would fine if he let himself be absorbed by the murder of Cal Barnett.

“You know what I mean,” Jack whispered loudly. Then, without waiting for a response, he shouted, “Everyone out!”

He hadn’t forced everyone to leave a scene in many weeks. Maybe it was easier for him to now believe Will’s reluctance was a sudden return of self-consciousness instead of an issue more difficult to resolve. The team filed out without questioning, and Crawford pulled the French doors shut behind them with a loud clack.

Will sighed and circled the body. As carefully as he raked the beaches of his conscience, he couldn’t find a shard of pity for the late doctor. He did, however, perceive the small smirk that shaped his features at the thought of Cal Barnett’s unrepentant arrogance being silenced. Violently. Cal wouldn’t have met Will’s standard for righteous judgment, but Hannibal was considerably less forgiving of others’ transgressions. This particular murder was less a tableau than a butcher’s block; Will only wondered when the inevitable dinner invitation would be extended.

Cal Barnett had sinned at the dinner table, and he would atone there as well. This was the obscured poetry-- the scene was a mockery. Cal Barnett would sip his martini from the top of a cardboard box for all of eternity in crime scene photos while Hannibal-- and Will himself-- made of meal out of whatever was taken.

The idea held more appeal than Will would admit.

Shaking himself from his thoughts and holding his palms to his face, Will decided to stop delaying the inevitable. Jack and the rest of the team would still want valid information about the scene, even if it led them nowhere. In all honesty, if Will didn’t have the particular insight he did into the Chesapeake Ripper, this kill wouldn’t have been a terribly revealing one. There was an air of humiliation, but that wasn’t so unusual for the Ripper; he never left the police guessing how he felt about his victims. Nothing in the crime pointed to Hannibal any more than any other Baltimore socialite Barnett had dined with over the past few months.

Will took a final glance at Barnett with clear eyes, then let his lids close. He didn’t sink into Hannibal’s thoughts, though; instead, he observed from a distance as he watched the kill unfold:

He goes to Cal Barnett at night. It's late enough for the neighbors to be asleep but not so late Cal won't open the door for him. A flash of a needle and Cal is sedated; Hannibal's satisfaction is not in the struggle but the outcome. He binds him and carves a gift from his flesh. He puts him in the bathtub— no reason to stain the refinished floors. Hannibal keeps Cal drugged but lets him regain a sliver of consciousness. He removes the vocal cords and shuts Barnett's mouth for good; he cannot fight back, cannot scream. As he dies, Hannibal pours him a well-made martini and recites his sins to him. When it is done, he leaves, unlocking the back door on his way. He slips into the night as quietly as he came-- as quiet as Cal Barnett.

Eyes popping open, Will found it easy to slide back into his own mind in the present moment. Probably, he thought darkly, because he wasn't terribly far from it to begin with. He opened the doors and looked at Jack Crawford, ignoring the others milling about pretending they weren't waiting for the boss's pet bloodhound to finish sniffing.

"The Ripper found Dr. Barnett's manners offensive," Will flatly answered the question hanging in the air between him and Jack. Thinking better of not divulging more, Will added, "I'm inclined to agree."

Jack raised both eyebrows and cocked his head to the side. Behind him, Zeller's head snapped to look at Will, glaring at him as though he knew exactly how dangerous Will Graham was.

"I met him once at a dinner party hosted by Dr. Lecter," Will elaborated, straightening his glasses. "He had too much to drink and let his tongue outpace his judgment. It appears that wasn't an isolated incident. "

At the sharp words, Price discreetly met Zeller's eyes in a meaningful exchange of glances.

"You think Dr. Lecter would have any insights regarding who Cal Barnett had been in contact with recently? People he *offended*.?" Jack questioned, letting Will's harsh words about the dead man roll off of him effortlessly. For Jack Crawford, the darker regions of Will's mind were a gift-- as long as they were on a leash.

"Possibly," Will responded with a noncommittal shrug. "They didn't seem close, but I'd imagine gossip isn't a rare commodity in that social circle."

Jack nodded and looked past Will to Dr. Barnett's posed, lifeless body.

"I'll give him a call," Jack said to nobody in particular. Then, specifically to the younger man in front of him who was trying desperately to find an escape route, he remarked, "Thank you for cooperating, Will."

The comment caused Will's eyes to flicker to Jack's as he sputtered for an answer. Jack's face remained stern as he clapped Will on the shoulder and walked past him to enter the dining room once again. The statement was meant to knock Will off-kilter-- a compliment on his notoriously poor social skills-- but it was successful for vastly different reasons. As Will headed toward the entryway with heavy, rapid steps, Beverly caught his eye for just a moment before returning to her work.

Outside, Will sighed as he tried to determine what Beverly had overheard. She would attribute Will's failure to divulge the full extent of his relationship with Hannibal to his need for privacy, which wasn't untrue. Still, he anticipated her ambushing him at some point in the near future.

Will made it to Quantico for class over ten minutes late. He was pleased to find all of his students waiting in the lecture hall-- nobody had dared leave, especially not during the second half of the semester when grades plummeted following midterms. Will marched to his desk and flipped on the projector without ado.

Between classes, Will checked his phone and saw a message from Jack directing him to check in with the lab team after his lectures were finished. Near the end of his last class, though, a familiar silhouette darkened his doorway. The light sheen of a well-fitted, gray plaid suit came into view as Hannibal entered and took an empty seat at the end of a row. It had become less uncommon for visitors to drop in on Professor Graham's classes as word of his recent field work circulated, so the students took minimal notice of the new man. The few lingering glances the stranger did receive were more appreciative than curious-- a fact Will was certain Hannibal and his sizable ego sensed. Undaunted, Will continued lecturing as planned, only meeting the eyes locked on him for a few seconds at a time.

When Will dismissed the class, he watched as Hannibal walked to the door then stepped to the side of it and waited. Will busied himself with turning off the projector and his laptop and straightening the stack of folders on his desk. After the final student exited, Hannibal closed the door with a soft click, and Will dropped his pretended distraction.

"Looking for a change of profession?" Will asked as Hannibal turned and made his way toward the younger man.

"Enjoying the instruction of a capable professor," the smooth voice lilted.

Will gave a dry chuckle as he set his glasses aside and came to lean against the front of his desk. Hannibal was visibly in good spirits— the corners of his mouth raised in a faint but pleasant smile and his eyes warmed to a rich mahogany. His smooth strides and tangible self-satisfaction summoned images of a cat presenting a mouse to its owner-- although, in Hannibal's case, it may have been more appropriate to compare him to a tiger hauling a wild pig by the nape. His confidence that Will would react positively-- or at least neutrally-- to the gift-wrapped crime scene grated again. By far, the most annoying aspect was that Hannibal wasn't wrong; Cal Barnett's death was no tragedy for the world to mourn.

"Did Jack tug on your leash as well?" Will inquired innocently, the barb ricocheting off of Hannibal's glossy contentment.

"Another Ripper victim, it appears. My assistance is more than voluntary," Hannibal gladly explained.

He was standing in front of Will now, glancing him up and down then refocusing on his eyes. In spite of the blatant presentation of his good mood and warmth, something uniquely predatory emanated from Hannibal in waves. His movement was liquid yet exact; his eyes glinted too brightly; his subtle smile showed the edges of sharp canines. The tiniest details

told a story Will already knew, but seeing the man after the morning's crime scene was both dismaying and intoxicating.

For a fraction of a second, the image of Hannibal and Will tearing Cal Barnett to shreds with their fingers and teeth flashed across Will's mind, and his heart beat the tiniest bit faster. Sharing the experience and seeing the other man's shadows as clearly as Will saw his own… Will couldn't fathom it here and now. Not with Hannibal watching him.

Will grasped his wandering mind and brought himself back to the present, where Hannibal's bright eyes still shined upon him.

"Jack finds you extremely helpful," Will commented numbly.

"Perceptive," Hannibal replied instantly and took another step closer, fully invading Will's space now.

"He hired me to be perceptive," Will shot back, unimpressed. "Agent Crawford is a pragmatist. Your presence has proven convenient for him."

Unfazed by Will's snark, Hannibal replied, "As his has proven convenient for me. Mutuality."

"Transactions," Will corrected.

A hand raised to push away hair that had fallen loosely across Will's forehead, and he felt his expression gentle involuntarily at the contact. Will sighed with less exasperation than before and returned to business.

"My assessment of the crime was the Ripper killed Cal because of his rudeness. I told Jack I'd seen first-Barnett's drunken antics first-hands," Will relayed his earlier conversation.

"Good," the other man commented.

"Grateful for another peek behind the curtain?" Will questioned, voice edging away from sarcasm toward teasing.

Hannibal answered with a crooked smile as one corner of his mouth raised further for a moment. The same hand that had pushed aside a stray curl now came to rest against the side of Will's neck, fingers curved in a loose grip. The skin felt warm against Will's, and he couldn't stop his own fingertips from finding their way to the lapel of Hannibal's suit jacket. The material was soft yet unyielding as Will ran his fingers over the crease.

Hannibal leaned in close until his lips were near Will's ear. In a whisper that shot heated breath across Will's skin, Hannibal asked, "What thoughts didn't you share with Agent Crawford?"

The tone and the touch made the question sound almost lascivious.

Hannibal pulled back only slightly to look into Will's eyes, remaining overly close.

Will's gaze traveled across the expectant face-- a face awaiting judgment, he realized. For all of Hannibal's self-congratulatory pleasure, he wasn't entirely certain how Will received the gesture. He hid this doubt exceptionally well; Will barely detected it before it passed.

"My compassion for Cal Barnett is no greater today than it was yesterday," Will replied matter-of-factly but in a thicker voice.

"A just and merciless god," Hannibal whispered with appreciative eyes.

But Will was growing tired of hearing about Cal Barnett as much as he was becoming unfocused by the hot breath and closeness of another body-- Hannibal's body, a pesky voice from deep within Will's mind chimed in.

"If he deserved mercy, he'd still be alive," Will uttered millimeters away from a waiting mouth. He surprised himself at his conviction in that moment, and as if punctuating his point, pressed his lips hard against the other man's.

Will could feel the curve of a smile under his kiss, so he snaked a hand under the suit jacket to Hannibal's lower back, then pulled him until he was almost flush against Will's own body. Will was caught between the desk and the solid mass before him, but having arrived there of his own volition, he found the narrow space didn't suffocate. He nipped at a lower lip in response, eliciting a humming, hungry noise from deep within the other man's chest. Some combination of adrenaline and pride had made Hannibal that much sharper today, but the clearest parts of Will's mind suggested it was the reality of having his work clearly seen by another that most sparked the current flickers of fire in the body in Will's arms.

However, the exploring caress of a tongue in Will's mouth was stopped abruptly short by the clattering closing of a door. Hannibal turned swiftly and stepped out of Will's field of vision. Nobody was there-- now.

The men exchanged questioning looks as they collected themselves, hands smoothing slacks and adjusting collars.

A few seconds later, a dramatically loud, persistent knock on the door sounded throughout the room.

"Come in!" Will barked.

Beverly's face appearing as she slowly opened the door was a relief.

To her credit, only her steeply arched eyebrows hinted at her surprise.

"Will," she greeted in a voice that was purposefully steady. "Dr. Lecter, good to see you again."

"Ms. Katz, it's been too long," Hannibal slyly greeted in return.

Will looked at a spot somewhere over the woman's head as he responded, "Hello, Beverly."

Hannibal looked back at the professor whose cheeks were distinctly flushed and whose eyes were looking everywhere but at either of the other individuals in the room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt whatever you two were...working on,” she stumbled over the last words, not quite nailing the landing. “But we’re ready for you in the lab, Will.”

“Right,” Will weakly confirmed. The logical portion of his brain fired off a more coherent thought, and he added, “Find anything interesting?”

“I used to like that question,” Beverly replied. “Then came the Ripper. No fingerprints, no DNA, no hair. The autopsy might be juicy— in a manner of speaking. I’ll save it for the lab, but here’s a preview: Dr. Barnett was alive when the vocal cords *and* kidney were removed.”

Will sardonically surmised, “The Ripper was particularly displeased with Dr. Barnett.”

“Slight understatement, Graham,” Beverly lightly answered. The slender woman half-turned and said to the pair, “I can meet you in the lab.”

“Oh, no,” Hannibal interjected, poised and polite as ever. “It would be terribly inconsiderate to delay Will from his duties. I have my own appointment to keep, as well.”

With no lack of amusement in the crinkles around his sparkling eyes, Hannibal nodded to Will as though he was leaving a business meeting. Will tried unsuccessfully not to glare.

Halfway between Beverly and Will, however, he paused, turned back, and spoke again in an amiable tone, “Will, I almost forgot-- dinner tonight?”

Between Hannibal’s devilish gleam, hidden well by his placid facade, and Beverly’s her poorly-concealed smile, Will could only nod and grind his teeth.

As Hannibal exited into the hallway, though, Will found his voice and called out, “My house. 7:00.”

If the change of venue from Hannibal’s pristine, self-made world to Will’s home turf caused any inconvenience, Hannibal didn’t let it slip into his demeanor. He simply tipped his head in recognition, cast a small, charming smile at Beverly, and vanished from sight, off to his meeting with Jack Crawford. Will suspected nothing could put a damper on the man’s fine mood when he was in the belly of the FBI as anything other than a suspect.

Will replaced his glasses, although he didn’t immediately look at Beverly. He let his shoulders sink as he crossed his arms, forcing his body to release some of the tension that coiled through it. He reminded himself that as far as Beverly was concerned, she had merely stumbled upon her extremely private friend more or less *making out*-- a cringe made Will’s insides shudder at the term-- with an equally mysterious man who was his on-again/off-again…*boyfriend*. The cringe returned with a vengeance, and Will exhaled heavily as he ran a hand through his hair.

He finally looked up at Beverly.

"*Will Graham*," she said his name slowly and pointedly, as though it expressed the full, mortifying indictment she was prepared to deliver.

Will compelled himself to move: He shoved his laptop into his bag, grabbed his jacket, and began walking across the classroom to the door. As he approached Beverly, he met her eyes again, his face feeling hot.

"A call would have sufficed," Will snipped.

Unfortunately, much like Hannibal's resilient good humor, Beverly was undaunted by Will's tone.

"Glad I didn't," she fired back, the teasing humor dripping from her words.

Will puffed out a sharp breath and idly wondered if he had died of embarrassment and was now in purgatory.

"Hey, joking," Beverly offered placatingly, perceiving the man in front of her wobbling between anxious and agitated. "Came to see if you wanted lunch before I tell you how much blood we found in a corpse's stomach."

It was unfair of him to be cold to Beverly-- it wasn't her fault. He could, however, blame Hannibal for not locking the door behind him. It was easier than blaming himself for having questionable judgment in most every facet of his life.

"Do I have a choice?" Will replied tersely as his stomach twisted into knots.

The lack of a response served as Beverly's answer.

They walked side-by-side without speaking, Will waiting for Beverly to direct the conversation and Beverly likely attempting to give Will enough space for his nerves to settle. Neither spoke until they settled in at a sunny table— their usual table, Will had come to think of it after their handful of meals and coffees together there— and were squarely face-to-face.

"Locks are a thing," Beverly said innocently into her iced tea.

"So is knocking," Will returned and took a bite of a tasteless sandwich. The bread was too soft and the meat too chewy, but he swallowed the mouthful before pushing it away disdainfully.

"Never had to knock before," Beverly practically chirped. Before Will could shoot her down again, she continued, "You're consenting adults. It doesn't make any difference to me how many classrooms you choose to defile."

Will's eyes shot around the room but found no eavesdroppers. Throat tight and face burning, he dropped his head into his hands and murmured half-formed obscenities. Beverly's fond, quiet laugh provided little soothing to his shot nerves.

"I'm done now," she stated reassuringly and Will raised his head, though he kept the heel of his hand ground against his mouth. More seriously, she added, "But you know Jack wouldn't

knock either."

Will sat back in his seat and let his hands drop. She was right.

"I'm not ready to have that conversation with Jack Crawford," Will replied, voice quiet enough for only Beverly to hear.

"Who would be?" Beverly asked rhetorically and took another hungry bite of the wrap in her hands. She ate as efficiently as she worked— quick, clean-edged bites followed by large sips. "But you have to."

Will crossed his arms over his chest and took a deep breath. He felt his chest tighten with bucking resentment.

Through a tight jaw, Will said, "He has no right to my personal life. There's not a rule against dating—" he almost gagged on the word "—an unofficial consultant."

Beverly grinned and commented back, "You know that. I know that. Jack knows that. It's not gonna matter if he finds outs from anyone but you."

Will tipped his head back and sighed heavily. Jack would take personal offense if he felt as though two of his team members were withholding information— conspiring, even. More importantly, it would cast doubt onto both Hannibal and Will in a general sense, painting them as individuals capable of keeping secrets from Jack and more than willing to do so for their own benefit. The possibility of something so juvenile putting both men at risk was unacceptable. Alternatively, divulging this information in spite of the severe discomfort it would cause Will might endear him just that much further to Jack Crawford— an employee sacrificing himself yet again in the name of the greater good.

When she spoke once more, Beverly's voice was soft, "Will, it's okay to admit you're human."

For Beverly Katz, the sentiment was a throwaway— a comfort. For Will, however, the words trickled between the stones of the forts in his mind, and the years he'd spent struggling to be someone whose humanity was recognizable instead of a distorted reflection of others' swirled in the mounting flood. At one time, not too long ago, he would've clung to her words as fleeting proof that his hard work meant something. Now, the monster he felt lurking in his attic had been given agency in the world, yet inexplicably, it had chosen to drag a semblance of Will Graham, the man, along with it instead of executing him.

With an eye roll, Will responded, "I'll talk to Jack. Soon."

The duo ate quietly for a few minutes, Will picking at the crust of the unpalatable sandwich — wouldn't Hannibal be glad to see him turn his nose up, he thought with an internal groan — and Beverly polishing off her wrap. She crumpled the parchment paper wrapper between her hands as she finished chewing and glanced up and down Will's sullen, worried face. Her face visibly lightened when a thought occurred to her, and Will's already uneasy stomach dropped further as he waited for her to speak again.

“Am I the only one who knows about this *thing* between you and Dr. Lecter?” she questioned, genuinely curious.

Will caught her gaze and gave a single nod, feeling another surge of embarrassment.

Beverly made a humming noise and maintained eye contact, considering his confession.

“Dr. Lecter strikes me as the type of man who’d like to show off something he’s proud of,” Beverly said evenly but choosing her words with caution. With a nonchalant shrug, she then added, “But what do I know? I’m not an FBI profiler.”

At that, she stood and tossed her balled up wrapper into a trash can a few feet away. Will followed her out, dumping the offensive sandwich on the way. The implication was ridiculous, and a scowl contorted Will’s face into a tense mask.

He had never been so grateful for an autopsy.

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay. I appreciate you all reading and sticking with it in spite of the up and down posting schedule. Thank you for your kind, funny comments and insights!

Will may have decided he would be the one to inform Jack of the evolving nature of his relationship with Hannibal, but that didn't mean he had to do it immediately. It was a Friday, and having a weekend between seeing Hannibal's latest art project and having the uncomfortable conversation seemed wise. It also felt unnecessarily cruel in ways Agent Crawford would hopefully never understand to try to fit both events in the same day. Plus, waiting another weekend delayed the inevitable, which Will found was one of his underappreciated skills.

Will left work on time and went directly home. He wasn't straightening up for Hannibal; Will had planned to clean this weekend, and he needed to finish his intended chores before the days slipped away from him. It seemed time had a habit of doing that lately. At home, Will propped open the storm door to let the dogs run in and out, energized by the spring air. Winston settled just outside the door on the front porch, watching Will as he passed in and out of view.

Will spoke to Winston as he hustled to remove as much dog hair as possible from the floor and every surface below shoulder height.

"Don't give me that look-- I'm not doing this for Hannibal, you know," Will called over his shoulder with a frustrated edge as he wiped the countertops and kitchen table.

Winston laid his head down.

Sweeping the floor, Will huffed, "What am I doing?"

Winston did not answer, only flopped to his side

Later, hastily mopping, Will growled, "I don't even like him."

Winston was decent enough a companion to not question the lie.

It was probably evidence enough that Will wasn't being entirely truthful when he ensured there was just enough time before 7:00 to speed through a shower, change into clean clothes, and change his sheets. As he slipped a pillow into a clean case, he experienced a moment of supreme self-awareness and couldn't help but laugh derisively at himself.

It was all so...common. Cleaning a house before a visit. Having dinner together. Hell, even sleeping together. Their intertwining lives were filled with these moments that were, honestly, incredibly normal-- domestic, even; yet, those memories were wedged between bloodier ones. Leave it to Will Graham to merge two distinctly different yet equally significant forms of intimacy into the single entity that was their relationship.

Will pictured Price asking how his Friday went. Will almost snorted as he imagined his response, "Oh, usual date night-- had dinner, fooled around, dismembered a body. Just a quiet evening at home."

Winston finally looked concerned for Will's wellbeing, leading his owner to realize he needed to get it together. Will had approximately seven minutes to do so before being faced with a man who could detect instability from no less than a football field away.

Giving everything a final once-over, Will went to sit on the porch with his family. As spring slowly unfolded in Virginia, the sun lit the sky later into the evening, and by the time Hannibal arrived, there was still a dull glow illuminating from behind the distant treeline.

The dogs, of course, rushed to stand at the sight and sound of the black vehicle rolling slowly down the driveway. Will wanted to frown, but he found himself standing as well without thinking about his actions. His dogs, his body, and Hannibal were all conspiring against him now, it seemed. Will watched as Hannibal unfolded his body and stood, a line of dark clothing and lean muscles. He greeted the dogs by name, and waited for them to sit before he began distributing the customary snacks. Will thought he ought to roll his eyes, but the not insignificant portion of him that compelled him to clean and change his clothing and let himself be pinned between a body and a desk forbid him from discouraging the ritual.

Satisfied, the dogs disbanded and led Hannibal in a processional toward the house. A sizable black bag hung from his arm; Will didn't need to ask about the contents.

"You're creating pathetic watch dogs," Will criticized as Hannibal stepped onto the porch.

Hannibal replied easily, "I believe you'll have to be the watchdog, Will."

Will chose to walk inside instead of responding, the invitation for Hannibal to follow unspoken but understood.

Inside, Hannibal hung his suit jacket on the coat rack and made a beeline for the kitchen. Will dawdled, returning to the doorway to ostensibly check on his dogs although he had seen them only seconds prior. The muscles in his stomach contracted uncomfortably as he thought about what was to be served and eaten that evening. He may have unknowingly consumed similarly sourced entrees before-- a point Will still hadn't entirely forgiven Hannibal for-- but intentionally spearing a fork into a chunk of human organ and lifting it to his lips was far beyond anything Will had ever considered himself capable of. Namely, Will had a choice in

the matter now, and his participation in consuming any part of the late Cal Barnett was as good as a golden seal of approval.

He made his way to the kitchen on numb legs. There, he found Hannibal already setting the scene for the evening's preparations: A bottle of white wine, two small glass bowls with salt and pepper respectively, and a container of olive oil all sat on the counter to his immediate right in a neat line. He was pushing chopped parsley and what looked to be about two cloves of minced garlic to the edge of the cutting board before him when Will entered. Hannibal gave him an acknowledging look-- crow's feet emerging in the faint smile still held there-- and reached into the inexplicably menacing black bag.

For a moment, Will pictured his hand emerging from the bag with a bleeding heart, the muscles still twitching in memory of its owner's life.

Instead, a neatly wrapped package emerged. The parchment paper was an unstained white, and the twine used to secure it was precisely placed. Hannibal untied the string and unfurled the layers of paper to reveal a cleanly-butchered and prepared kidney, already split in half and free of any gristle. If Will didn't know the animal these chunks of meat had been cut from, he would have readily assumed the organ had been procured from a highly respectable butcher's shop.

Relief he was quite sure he didn't deserve flooding through his system, Will edged closer to Hannibal and his work, his blue eyes on the bloodless package. He watched as Hannibal lifted the twin pieces of kidney from the paper with as much care and skill as he would a duck breast or lamb shank. He began slicing it in thin pieces.

As was habit now, Hannibal explained his work to Will as the younger man came to stand fully next to him, "*Rognoncini trifolati.* A simple preparation which allows the kidney to be enjoyed for what it is. Traditionally made with lamb, but I've found it particularly versatile."

"Practice makes perfect," Will grimly intoned.

Hannibal only offered a half-smile, the tips of his canines flashing on one side.

"Would you care to mind the polenta?" he asked as politely as ever, smoothly slicing his chef's knife through Cal Barnett's kidney.

Will went to the stovetop and gave the simmering grains a gentle stir, their lightly sweet smell wafting upward and causing his stomach to roll again, though this time with hunger. A few more minutes of Hannibal's preparations, and he turned toward the stove to begin heating the pan, relieving Will of his duties. The dark-haired man stood uneasily in the space between the stovetop where Hannibal worked and the counter where the prepared slices of meat waited.

A question that had tugged at the back of Will's mind escaped his lips, his voice low and steady but not aggressive as he asked, "When did you first try...this?"

It was only slightly more delicate a question than *When'd you first eat someone?* but Will thought the nuance would be appreciated.

Hannibal's eyes focused on the pan, and he did not speak. His Adam's apple bobbed with a hard swallow, and although his face did not change, Will sensed the danger in his stillness. Will let his own gaze drop to the floor but eyed the chef's knife in the corner of his vision. He was nearer to it, but he suspected Hannibal might be faster. Will's eyes traveled to the stovetop again as he reminded himself that regardless of how monstrously bad an idea it was, he and Hannibal had tentatively reached a point where they were not actively trying to kill or imprison one another. Scoping out the closest possible weapons was not the path to peace between them.

The man at the stove still hadn't spoken. He moved toward the cutting board, and Will forced himself to breathe and not reveal how much he did not want any sharp objects within arm's reach of either of them at the present moment. Hannibal placed the knife on the now-empty sheets of parchment paper and carried the cutting board to the hot, oiled saute pan.

Will didn't think he wanted to hear the answer to his question any longer, and he opened his mouth to backpedal. Although Hannibal's eyes didn't rise to Will's face, he must have realized Will had reached the apex of his discomfort, because he chose that moment to begin speaking again.

"The first time," Hannibal began deliberately, "wasn't a choice."

Will's eyes bore into Hannibal's even as the man continued his work and refused to meet them with his own stare. Will had the dizzy, breathless sensation of sinking-- drowning-- as dozens of scenarios flashed through his mind, each building upon the sparse pieces of information Will knew of the other man's past.

Hannibal had been an orphan. Were the children in the orphanage forced to eat the dead to survive?

He was an orphan because he'd lost his parents at a young age. Did it occur in the time between their deaths and the discovery of the parentless child? A desperate grasp for life by a starving young man? Had his sister been forced to do the same?

No, she'd died young, and he'd killed those responsible. He hadn't avenged his parents, and surely they hadn't both died suddenly at a young age without their ends being violent ones

What made Mischa's death the one that first allowed him to shake off his mask of humanity?

Hannibal had been born a shark; Will could imagine no better way to first scent blood in the water than to hunt those who killed-- and ate-- his sister.

Those who'd led him to consume her, as well.

The weight of these speculations anchored Will to his spot in the kitchen. He wouldn't ask for confirmation-- not now, not ever. He knew enough to understand that which needed to be understood.

The slices of kidney sizzled in the pan, and Hannibal flipped them carefully. The scent of cooking meat, garlic, and olive oil permeated the space around them, and Will's stomach--

which was pleading to be fed-- rumbled even as his brow wrinkled in thought and his mouth turned into the slightest frown.

For the first time in many minutes, Hannibal looked up at Will. His eyes were weary, and his face was stuck in the transitional ground between guarded and relaxed-- between Dr. Lecter and Hannibal, Will recognized.

Before Hannibal had a chance to make a comment that would deflect attention away from his answer to Will's question, Will reached out his hand and ran his fingers through loose, graying locks. The fingers stopped at the base of Hannibal's skull and held firmly but not roughly.

Hannibal's expression was becoming closed again, his eyes narrowing. Will realized the man might have mistakenly seen pity in the face staring at him; he imagined that was one emotion that would not be tolerated. Will knew the feeling too well, and the need to make Hannibal aware that it wasn't pity but acute understanding jolted Will to move closer and reshape his frown into an expression of thoughtful concentration. In response, Hannibal relaxed his jaw, his own concession. Instinct guided Will then, his subconscious movements and microexpressions reacting to and then leading Hannibal's. Will leaned in and tipped his head just enough so their foreheads lightly touched, and the hand still on the back of Hannibal's head felt the other man willingly doing the same. Will's eyes closed as they stood for a few long seconds, the meat still crackling on the stovetop and the sounds of dog paws clacking into the living room providing an unconventional but comforting soundtrack.

Without thinking and without opening his eyes, Will said just above a whisper, "It's good you're here."

The words were far from poetry or declarations of affection, but they hung heavily in the air just the same, weighted by their many meanings and the sentiments behind them. Will barely caught the sound of an exhale catching before being evenly released.

Will freed Hannibal from his hold and pulled back, giving them both the benefit of avoiding Hannibal's eyes.

"I'll set the table," Will told the other man in a poor imitation of casualness and left him to continue cooking.

As Will arranged the utensils and cloth napkins on his small table, he allowed himself the luxury of feeling shaken for a few, private moments. His simple words to Hannibal were true-- he was maybe not thankful but unmistakably *happy* to have the other man's presence in his life. He was glad Hannibal entered the life he was born into with an otherworldly strength and innate darkness that allowed him to survive the horrors he undoubtedly faced. It was, as far as Will felt in that moment, fundamentally better that Hannibal had overcome and absorbed the pain doled out by the universe so that he could be here, now, in a kitchen in Wolf Trap, Virginia-- even if that meant countless people had to die along the way. It was a queasy, shameful feeling, but Will couldn't excise it from his mind. However, his body had not quite caught up with the rushing stream of emotions: With a jolt of alarm, Will noticed how tightly he was holding the steak knife in his hand. He didn't know why or what he had intended to do with it, but he dropped it to the table with a sharp clink as it hit the utensils

already arranged at his place setting. He straightened the set-up with unsteady hands and lingered at the table for a moment longer, holding his offending right hand with the thumb and index finger of his left.

Was it the dying throes of his personal guilt that led him to, for only a second, clutch a blade with the vague notion that what they were together had to be forcibly removed from the world, no matter how beautiful it felt from the inside? Or, perhaps, it was pure, animal fear of the tidal wave of emotions that assaulted him? Maybe, even, it was a ghostly version of Jack Crawford that lived only in Will's mind trying one last time to impress his brand of absolute justice onto Will's conscience.

He couldn't say-- enacting violence against Hannibal or himself was nothing he wanted. Which, honestly, was an entirely new problem he wasn't prepared to deal with.

Will returned to Hannibal's side to watch as the man plated. He let himself stand too close, feeling the need to assure himself the present moment was real and too tired to make a respectable show of trying to fight that impulse. Hannibal didn't give any indication of minding the other man in his space.

At the table, there was a few seconds of uncertain silence as Will scrutinized his plate. It smelled delicious and looked like any other dish Hannibal made-- a vaguely unnerving thought. He fidgeted with the fork in his fingers, but his empty stomach growled with no such reservations. Hannibal's eyes flickered to Will at the audible sound, the first traces of amusement returning to them. Will was glad to see it despite its grisly cause.

Will cut then speared a small piece of browned meat and let it pass between his lips without hesitation. He chewed thoughtfully, but the flavor gave no hints to the kidney's origin. It could have been veal or lamb, and nobody would have detected the difference.

But it wasn't, so Will summoned the image of Cal Barnett to test himself. He pictured the boorish man and his unkind prodding. The embarrassment of his wife and the discomfort of Hannibal's other guests. His refusal to yield until he was shamed by someone he considered more dangerous than himself.

Cal Barnett did not, necessarily, deserve to die. However, he certainly did not deserve to live.

Will swallowed, and the food set easily in his hungry body. He glanced up and saw Hannibal still observing him openly, the man's knife and fork frozen midway through cutting a sliver of meat. The dark eyes were further blackened by dilated pupils that spoke of either intense interest or a desire to cut dinner short and resume where they had left off in the classroom prior to Beverly's entrance.

The composed man caught himself and continued eating.

Meanwhile, the memory of what had occurred earlier in the day had caught up with Will, and although he was now eating at a normal pace, he could feel his face flush. Not for the first time, Hannibal appeared to be somewhere between psychic and painfully attuned to Will's thinking.

“How is Ms. Katz?” he asked pleasantly before taking a sip of wine.

Will smiled wryly at his plate, unsurprised at the question.

“Scandalized,” Will answered. “And delighted.”

A chuckle came from Hannibal’s chest as he set his wine glass back on the table.

“I hope I haven’t undermined your professionalism among colleagues,” Hannibal replied, not sounding a bit concerned.

“Beverly already knew about…,” Will faltered, “this.”

Hannibal’s head cocked to the side with curiosity.

“Did she?” he asked unnecessarily, a prompt for Will to continue in spite of his reluctance.

Will hummed in the affirmative around a bite. Then, having swallowed and taken a leisurely sip of his own wine, he elaborated, “She noticed some incriminating bruises.”

Will’s tone suggested he very much wished he had told Beverly he had been accosted in an alleyway. The other man’s face twisted into a close-lipped smile that could best be described as devilish and was horribly hidden by the fork coming to meet his mouth.

“Glad you’re pleased with this,” Will grumbled, only further alighting the glee in the amber eyes staring at him. As though wanting to quash the burgeoning joy, Will added, “She thinks I should tell Jack.”

The comment, however, did not have the desired effect. If anything, it only stoked the flames of mischief and intrigue that were burning across the table from him.

“It wouldn’t do for Agent Crawford to feel as though two of his friends were concealing information,” Hannibal replied reasonably but with a smile gleaming in his eyes.

“It’s none of his business,” Will snipped and took a harsh bite, teeth hitting the tines of the fork. He’d already reconciled himself to the fact that he would be having this conversation with Jack at some point in the near future, but he chafed under Hannibal’s enjoyment.

Hannibal’s expression turned thoughtful, his smile vanishing although his eyes remained bright.

“It could be time to rip the bandage off entirely, as it were,” he mused.

Will furrowed his brow, not liking the direction of Hannibal’s thinking.

Hannibal continued in a voice that was a touch too reasonable, too logical, “If we were to continue seeing one another without our mutual acquaintances being aware, it would appear rather odd when the news inevitably spreads.”

“Neither of us is known for our normalcy,” Will argued back in a murmur.

“Then best not to add further suspicion,” Hannibal coolly responded.

Hannibal’s demeanor hadn’t changed noticeably, but he was watching Will more carefully now and leaning forward in his chair. Beverly’s earlier suggestion that, just possibly, Hannibal was not entirely satisfied with continuing their relationship in secret reverberated through Will’s mind, sounding more like a petulant *I told you so* than a cogent thought.

“What do you suggest?” Will questioned, sounding more confrontational than he expected.

“Nothing in particular,” Hannibal easily replied, though Will could almost hear the roaring of the gears in Hannibal’s quick mind. His eyes dropped to his plate as he continued, “Although, it has been many months since my last dinner party.”

Will scoffed, face burning.

“A party. How subtle,” Will snarkily answered, then took a long drink.

“I can think of no more natural a method,” Hannibal remarked, clearly becoming increasingly attached to his proposed plan. “I host, you attend, our guests draw their own conclusions. Almost painless.”

Our guests.

Almost painless.

Will scowled at the last words, recognizing the sting behind them. He wanted to object further. He wanted to tear the idea apart and dig in his heels, demanding nobody but the two of them should be allowed any insight into their private lives whatsoever. However, the emboldened voice in his mind that told him to run his fingers through soft, golden and silver hair and to put unreasonable trust in a monstrous man desperately wanted the increasingly stony look on Hannibal’s face to dissolve into warmth again.

Will couldn’t tell which of them was the fool in this particular situation, but he suspected it was both of them. A draw, as usual.

He sighed and leaned back as far as his chair would allow. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at his plate, which was surprisingly almost empty now. How easily he had hopscotched over his hesitations.

“I tell Jack,” Will reaffirmed. Then, relenting yet already dreading the event Hannibal’s theatrical mind would plan, he added, “No toasts, no announcements. Just dinner.”

Hannibal nodded solemnly, but Will did not miss the self-satisfied glint returning to his eyes as he looked into his wine glass.

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

> Heeeeyyyyyy, guys! Sorry for the long wait. I was overambitious and did the Hannictober challenge, which was super fun but also ate all of my writing time. I'm back to just this story and plan to resume my 1-2 chapters a week. We're in the final stretch of chapters, I'd say; I'm thinking we might hit an even 50. Thank you so much for sticking with the story and being patient and leaving such encouraging words! 🧡 🧡 🧡
>
> 🔳 Warning: A few NSFW references in the first part of the chapter. Nothing too spicy but not at all ambiguous either.

Their tentative decision to strip their relationship of its outward air of mystery, perhaps as much for themselves as for others, was softened by a night spent breathing against the nape of Hannibal's neck, the skin smelling clean and lightly spiced by whatever overpriced cologne had been applied hours earlier. Will drifted into slumber to the sound of steady breathing and the warmth of a body, signs of life in the vicious form he held between his arms; it wasn't fear that kept him from fully plummeting into the black of true sleep, though. In the early hours of the morning, the sun not yet risen, the breathing became shallower, and the minute change jolted Will from his hazy half-sleep. He nuzzled forward, safe in the dark room.

The two remained suspended in a state of sleepy ease, for a moment nothing more than two bodies seeking comfort and rest. Yet, Will knew this was finite-- this moment, this peace, this bond-- and the knowledge tightened his chest and made the taste of salt collect at the back of his throat. In this state, stretched between happiness and despair as much as between sleeping and wakefulness, a question which had floated amorphously in Will's mind collected into a recognizable shape.

Will whispered into the darkness, "Is there a life beyond separation?" After a pause, he added in a similarly quiet voice, "Could we allow one another to live?"

Seconds became minutes without response from the body in Will's arms-- no words, no change in breathing, no quickening of the heart. Will almost hoped Hannibal had been asleep and missed his knife-edged question, but Hannibal confirmed his consciousness by slowly turning onto his back, eyes closed even as his face toward the ceiling and Will withdrew his grasp. Hannibal's left leg still remained flush with the stacked calves angled toward him, and the failure to disconnect entirely was not unnoticed.

"Your existence in the world makes it a more interesting place," Hannibal said evenly, not the first time he'd expressed the sentiment. "I wonder if I would choose to distance myself from the source of my curiosity or if I would find the knowledge of its existence unbearable."

Will listened to the soft inhales and exhales and watched the man's chest rise and fall steadily in time with the melody. The motion ceased for only a few seconds as Hannibal opened his eyes, turned to look at Will, and concluded, "I cannot predict my reaction to your choices any more than I am able to predict the choices themselves.

The eyes were unreadable in the dark, but Will sensed no pangs of concern or rising anger. It wasn't a question meant to wound, and it hadn't landed as such.

Hannibal reached out a hand and took one of Will's in it, tenderly examining it as much as he could in the unlit room. Voice indifferent, he asked, "Would you cage me, deny me my freedom? Or end my life as a mercy?"

"If I killed you, it wouldn't be out of mercy," Will replied swiftly. Hannibal pressed his mouth chastely to Will's palm, and Will could detect the curve of a smile against the thin skin there. When it was freed, Will snaked the hand around Hannibal's head and pulled him forward, the two moving into a suffocating embrace.

And in that way, the conversation ended, relief unexpectedly flooding Will's body and relaxing him into the bed as he saw clearly a future with only two possible outcomes: *This* until they were separated by an outside influence-- imprisonment or death, most likely-- or mutually agreed upon destruction. Never had Will felt he knew himself or his life so well as he did in that moment. They fell asleep again intertwined and did not wake until after sunrise.

The rest of the weekend was a blur, moving too quickly while each moment felt as though it could be eternal if Will didn't think too hard about it:
A morning shower that began with a snide remark about Will's body wash and ended with Will lying on the tiled bathroom floor as a ravenous mouth moved over him and two slick fingers moved within him, self-consciousness about the latter dissipating as he shuddered through a shattering release.

A late breakfast.

A long afternoon at the stream, Will in the water and Hannibal reading beside it.

A dinner, fish as the entree.

A discussion about time and its surprisingly malleable nature.

A second night together, Hannibal teaching Will-- upon the younger man's request-- precisely how to bring mind-erasing pleasure with sure hands and a hungry mouth, and Will being rewarded with the sight of Hannibal writhing once before catching himself and pressing his back against the bed.

A night of deep sleep.

A reluctant breakfast followed by an hour spent in silent contemplation as coffee cooled in mugs.

A parting which felt painful in a way that made Will blush and throw himself into working on a boat motor as soon as the black car was out of his driveway.

When Will woke up on Monday morning, it was the moments spent in quiet reverie that weighed heavily on Will's shoulders, a pleasurable burden. Hannibal surely knew Will delighted not in speaking but in silence, and Will idly wondered if the older man had exploited the fact over the previous weekend. He would have been wise to, Will realized. Regardless of how it was conceived, the fierce desire to protect what had formed between them in the silent moments of the past months was what compelled Will to stand outside Jack Crawford's door at 7:45 AM on Monday morning. Will didn't quite pace outside the door but only because he caught himself and planted his feet firmly in a spot that allowed him to rest his body against the wall. He recalled being fourteen and standing in the principal's office at one of his many schools, preparing to justify why he shouldn't be punished for a cutting remark he'd let slip to a teacher, his words working faster than his discretion. This felt like a replay of that moment-- Will knowing he'd done something wrong but not feeling altogether bad about it.

At five til, Jack finally appeared in the hallway, briefcase in one hand and cell phone in the other. He looked at Will quizzically, then with concern.

"Everything okay, Will?" Jack asked as he walked a bit faster down the hall. He stopped in front of Will, with his head cocked, waiting for a clue that might tell him why his profiler was standing sentry outside his office before work hours on a Monday.

"Yes," Will answered quickly, not wanting Jack to go into this particular conversation doubting Will's *stability*. He'd never been more stable than this, which would've been a laughable thought had he not been staring Jack Crawford in the face. "I'd like to talk."

Jack's face slipped from concern to questioning exasperation. Will could see in the expression that Jack thought Will was either quitting or feeling the teeth of insanity nipping at his heels again. The agent unlocked the door and entered the office, flicking on the light switch and letting Will in before closing the door behind them. Will walked the edge of the office as Jack put his briefcase and phone on his desk and draped his coat over the back of his office chair. When Will felt Jack's large, demanding eyes on him, he came to take a seat across from Jack and bent over, elbows on knees. Part of his body language was affected, the picture of a nervous, submissive employee who recognized the large man's greater power, but a significant portion of it was genuine. The grain of truth helped the act seem more convincing but made it that much more difficult as well.

"You wanted to talk?" Jack finally asked, still standing and thus towering over Will's seated form.

"Everything's fine…," Will started, then trailed off.

"Doesn't seem like everything's fine. You don't show up at my office when there's nothing to tell," Jack said decidedly and sat down in his office chair across the desk from Will.

Will smirked at the point, and in response, Jack's brow smoothed some from its harsh, furrowed ridge.

“I just thought I should be the one to tell you…,” Will paused again, but this time, Jack let the half-statement hang until Will could finish it. “I’ve recently become involved with someone who works for-- with-- the BAU. I’m sure Nathan Voss or whoever has taken Freddie’s place will publish something tawdry and full of half-truths about us one day. I didn’t want to blindside you.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed as he frowned, organizing his thoughts on Will’s ambiguous statement and shuffling through the questions that surely came to mind.

“Because half-truths are still truths,” Jack responded, watching Will’s face.

Will’s eyes shot down to his folded hands under the scrutiny.

“Yes,” Will confirmed.

Will’s gaze wandered the wall of the office, avoiding Jack’s stare, and he watched as the second hand smoothly made its way around the face of the wall clock.

“I appreciate you telling me, Will, but I don’t know how much the crime bloggers will care if you and Alana--” Jack stopped at Will’s head snapping back to face Jack.

“Not Alana,” Will replied.

Jack studied him again and leaned far back in his chair. Will met his eyes, and Jack’s thinking was almost audible in the small room. He was finding the person who may cause controversy-- who already had.

“Was this going on when Freddie Lounds ran the story?” Jack questioned, jaw tighter at the prospect that he had been lied to.

Will shook his head vehemently and sat upright, arms crossing over his chest as his hands gripped at the opposite elbows they landed on. He suppressed the gratitude he felt for Jack being wise enough to identify Hannibal as the party in question without making Will say it.

“No, absolutely not,” Will denied truthfully. He added in a weak voice, “We were friends. He helped me.”

“Because he was your *psychiatrist*,” Jack responded in his booming voice, not yelling because he didn’t have to.

“He was never my psychiatrist, Jack,” Will answered in a less apologetic tone. He was far more comfortable arguing with Jack than pleading with him.

“He was for one appointment,” Jack shot back.

“And I’ve been cleared by another doctor since,” Will rebutted. He let the air cool between them for a few moments before he pulled his trump card. “But I do understand the position you’re in, Jack. I can go back to teaching full-time if you think it’s better that way.”

Jack scowled openly, recognizing the play for what it was but being unable to disengage from it.

“Neither of us wants that. You’re saving lives, Will,” Jack sternly replied. “I’m not asking you to choose between your personal life and the job. I just need transparency.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Will calmly said, his brows arching as he waited for Jack’s approval.

Jack sighed and rotated the chair so that he was facing the wall instead of the desk. Will watched his face go from scrunched concern to furrowed thoughtfulness to smooth resignation.

“Couldn’t just go to a bar like a normal agent,” Jack said to the wall, friendliness tingeing his gentler tone.

There it was.

“I’m not a normal agent,” Will answered self-deprecatingly.

With a faint smile that didn’t reach his eyes, Jack responded, “No, you’re not.”

Will uncrossed his arms and let them rest against the chair as his shoulders relaxed, and he noticed Jack’s form similarly melt against the back of his chair.

“Can’t put you on the same case anymore,” Jack mused to himself. Good-naturedly, he added, “I hope it’s worth the inconvenience you’re causing me.”

A genuine flush caused Will’s cheeks to whiten as his neck and chest reddened-- precisely the reaction Jack had angled for. While Will didn’t enjoy feeling like an enamored schoolboy in front of Jack, he recognized dimly that every authentic interaction they had in this moment could only help him later-- if it ever came to that.

“Does anybody else know?” Jack asked curiously, tapping his fingers against his desk.

Will sighed heavily.

“That’s a no,” Jack answered his own question.

“Beverly’s...observant,” Will offered, feeling his chest and neck grow warmer still. “But I think there’s an expiration date on this secrecy.”

Jack chuckled wryly, undoubtedly picturing Hannibal in all of his baroque glory, and said, “I imagine so.”

After a few more moments, Will stood and made his way to the door. Before he opened it, however, he turned back and asked, “How’s Bella?”

Jack looked at the floor in front of him, not at Will, and blinked heavily a few times before replying, “No change.”

Will nodded and swallowed hard. He wouldn't offer his condolences for a woman who still lived-- he could think of no greater insult. Instead, he settled on a simple nod, and said, "Thanks, Jack," as he exited.

On the walk toward his classroom, Will considered calling Hannibal but decided against it; Hannibal wouldn't be worried about something he deemed so insignificant to their lives. Plus, Will had the vague idea that Jack might call Hannibal himself at some point during the day, and Will much preferred the idea of the doctor being caught at least mildly unaware. Classes went on as usual, though Will could see the students had picked up on something lighter in their professor's mood; they raised their hands a tad quicker and didn't entirely avoid Will's spectacled gaze. Mid-afternoon, moments after the last class ended, Will was summoned to a creek that branched off from the Potomac to look at the disfigured corpse of a body, which had been found by kayakers; the body had clearly been weighted down for days before breaking loose, but Will agreed with Beverly's preliminary assessment that the mutilation was caused by animals, rocks, and the destructive force of water itself-- not a serial killer. It was almost good to be able to deem something a regular murder instead of an ornately-planned piece of a larger puzzle. Of course, if more bodies floated to the surface of the river, that theory would be disproven, but it was nice to consider it true for as long as they could.

At home, the sun shined brighter into the evening, and Will took advantage of it, bathing all seven dogs with the speed of a professional. He only threatened to take Max through a carwash once, which was an improvement over previous baths. Will showered-- didn't remember too vividly how the tile had felt under his back-- and fed the dogs, then himself. His hair was still damp and his food still warm when he heard a car in the driveway.

The dogs raced to see who their unexpected visitor was, and Will wasn't far behind.

A black vehicle with heavily tinted windows crept forward on the gravel, going slow enough to avoid risking paint damage from rogue stones. He had seen this car before, but he couldn't place it. Will stepped out onto his porch, commanding his dogs back, and stood with his arms crossed as he watched the car-- an honest-to-God *Maybach* of all things-- come to a stop. Not for the first time, Will was grateful his neighbors were far enough that they couldn't see his driveway and the menagerie of luxury vehicles that had come to visit there as of late. The engine cut off and a rear door opened.

Margot, Will remembered, as a woman emerged and locked eyes with him.

"I was in the neighborhood. Thought we might chat," she called out in her low voice-- *sultry* Will thought with some amusement-- and made her way around the vehicle.

Will had liked her, though he knew enough to distrust her, and his curiosity led him to say noncommittally, "Why not?"

She gave him a sly grin and sauntered by him, pausing at the door.

"Hope you like dogs," he told her, then opened the door.

It was a small surprise that Margot did, in fact, like dogs-- or did a fine impression of someone who did. She kneeled down and let the dogs crowd her, running fair hands over their coats and scruffing their necks gently with manicured fingernails. It was endearing; Will wondered cynically what the woman wanted from him.

He poured himself a scant finger of Scotch-- enough to be a good host but not enough to invite a long stay-- and held a second empty glass in his hand questioningly. When Margot rose and dusted off her gray skirt, which was now covered in stray dog hairs, she looked up at Will with her big, doe eyes and perpetual smirk.

“Can’t, I’m afraid,” she answered and placed a hand lightly against her lower stomach.

Will held his glass up to her in a mock cheer and said grimly, “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Margot replied with as much sincerity as Will.

Will took a sip, let the smooth liquor coat his mouth then burn the inside of his chest as he swallowed.

“Why are you here?” he asked, discarding the buffer of niceties.

Margot looked at an armchair and questioned with a raised brow, “May I?”

Will swept a hand in a gesture that communicated she might as well sit in his chair if she was going to invite herself to his home.

“You seem to know a lot about Dr. Lecter,” Margot said from her seated position, legs crossed primly but eyes knowing.

“Only seems fair,” Will replied in a clipped voice. He wouldn’t tip his hand even if Margot seemed to already know what was between his fingers.

“Perhaps that’s why I’m here: Fairness,” Margot coolly purred.

Will spoke seriously but darkly, “There is no fairness where Dr. Lecter is concerned. There is power and there is destruction-- you wield one to avoid the other.”

Margot’s eyes did not move from his form as she sat statue-still in Will’s armchair, looking terribly out of place among the mismatched furniture.

“He told me to kill my brother,” Margot finally said, voice clear and strong.

Will laughed once in his chest, the sound barely a hum.

“Sounds like him,” Will commented.

Margot’s head tilted a bit, but otherwise, she remained motionless. She had learned that-- disappearing into the furniture, waiting for the larger predator in the room to move first.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why?” Margot spoke with more humor than curiosity in her voice.

“Aren’t you here to tell me?” Will replied smugly, a bit more cutting than she deserved. When she leaned back a few inches in her chair, Will felt guilty; he also could understand exactly why Margot might be persuaded to kill her brother.

Margot caught herself and smiled foxlike, a seductive facade.

“My brother practices a form of cruelty that lends itself to neither definition nor rehabilitation,” Margot remarked. It was a practiced answer.

“Psychopaths can be found in every social class,” Will returned and took another small sip of his drink.

“Do they make good therapists?” she asked through her frozen smile.

Will put his drink down, then, and stood fully facing Margot, meeting her challenging, intrusive grin.

“Hannibal isn’t a psychopath,” Will stated. “He defies known pathologies.”

“Exceptional,” Margot surmised, and Will wanted to tell her never to say that to Hannibal himself.

“In the way a house fire during a thunderstorm is exceptional,” Will returned.

“Doesn’t change the nature of the thing,” Margot quipped back.

“No, I suppose it doesn’t,” Will remarked without emotion. “You haven’t answered my question. Hannibal told you to kill your brother-- why did that lead you here?”

The smile faded at the directness of the question, and Will sensed he was seeing Margot’s true face for a few fleeting moments.

“My family has a frankly vulgar amount of money,” Margot began, “and the unfortunate tradition of leaving it only to male heirs.”

“And if there isn't a male heir?” Will asked with interest as the conversation became less coded.

“The Southern Baptist Convention has a very good day,” Margot answered, disgust hanging from every word.

Will understood, then, why Hannibal had said Margot wanted a child-- why she had achieved that goal, it seemed. He found himself hoping it was a boy in spite of his lingering irritation at the woman in his living room.

Margot pulled back her venom and went on in a collected tone, “I never thought of having a child-- of saving myself with a child.”

“Not until you started therapy,” Will inferred.

“It was a suggestion, although I cannot recall whose,” Margot confirmed.

“If you remain Hannibal’s patient, you’ll often find yourself forgetting which thoughts are your own and which are his,” Will replied without malice.

Margot shrugged elegantly, a small movement of her thin frame, and said, “I prefer being led to someone else’s plan than having no plan at all.”

A lifetime of abuse, then, Will thought. Desperation.

“But I believe Dr. Lecter might have plans of his own,” Margot went on. “Ones he doesn’t intend on sharing with me.”

Will furrowed his brow, looked at her seriously. He did not doubt Hannibal was spinning a web of some sort, though he couldn’t tell to what end.

“Mason, my brother, has begun visiting Dr. Lecter, as well. After their first meeting, Mason came into my bedroom and just stared at me. He stared until I couldn’t stand it any longer, until I asked him what he saw,” Margot described, her eyes glassy as she remembered the scene. “He said he was staring at nothing. Then, he told me he loved me.”

A chill ran down Will’s spine at Margot’s memory, feeling her fear now.

“I thought he was going to kill me that night. I don’t know why he didn’t,” Margot quietly added.

A held breath escaped Will’s throat as he responded, “Killing would remove you from his reach.”

Margot gasped a choked laugh and nodded.

“If I die, so does my child. But he could kill the baby without killing me,” Margot explained numbly. “I looked you up after we met-- FBI, right? Saved people; killed people. I thought maybe you’d understand,” Margot spoke more earnestly than she had ever before in Will’s presence, the ice cracking into a plea. “And I thought maybe you’d help me save one more.”

The hand that went to her flat lower stomach once more demanded Will’s attention. She had come here with that line and this gesture already planned in her mind; it was manipulative and dangerous for them both. It was also effective because she wasn’t entirely wrong. The bundle of cells that would hopefully become a child was being used as a pawn in a macabre game of chess. Will’s morality may have been lopsided, but it wasn’t so muddled as to believe the child Margot hoped for deserved to be caught between Hannibal’s mysterious machinations and Mason’s apparent brutality.

But that didn’t change Will’s own selfish desire to preserve the world he had reassembled for himself brick by broken brick.

“What do you want from me?” he eventually asked, breaking the silence.

“Only a warning,” Margot replied. Will wondered if she had come here with a greater request in mind but adjusted her expectations based on Will’s hesitancy. Margot added, “If you know something that could save my baby…”

Will and Margot both knew that calling a pregnancy this early a *child* or a *baby* was not entirely accurate, but just like knowing Margot had likely planned to caress her stomach, the knowledge that her words were chosen with a specific intent barely lessened the impact. Margot fished into her clutch and pulled out a small square of ivory paper. She held it out to Will; it was a blank business card with a phone number hand written in the center.

“Anything. Day or night,” Margot said as she reached the card further from her own body and toward Will’s.

He took a few steps and pulled it from her fingers, wondering if he would come to regret each movement.

“You’re a good man,” Margot offered weakly as thanks.

“I don’t need to be a good man,” Will commented back, eyes on the card in his hand.

Margot didn’t respond, only stood, paused in front of Will as though she might properly thank him, but then turned from him toward the door.

He waited until he heard the car door shut before locking his own front door, feeling the outside creeping in. He returned to the dinner table but didn’t eat, the food cold and his appetite gone. Will tapped the thick paper against the wood of the dining table and thought of warm beds and sharp teeth.

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

> This WAS going to be nothing but dinner party. Then, the cannibal muses requested some *ahem* bonding time prior to said dinner party. The party does start in this chapter, though!
>
> ▨ ▨ ▨ ▨NSFW: Many paragraphs. I still feel suuuuppppeeeerrr inept writing sex scenes, but I guess practice makes perfect? ▨ ▨ ▨ ▨

Leave it to Hannibal to expedite Will's discomfort by planning a fifteen-person dinner party in a week and a half. If Hannibal's social distinction was at all in doubt, the fact that he secured all of his intended guests on such short notice would have put those suspicions to rest; Will inwardly rolled his eyes at the scheduling gymnastics the doctor's distinguished guests would have had to endure to avoid declining Dr. Lecter's invitation. Will realized his hypocrisy at turning his nose up at the social climbers when his own trunk held a weekender bag tucked alongside a new, blue suit still covered by
the garment bag from the store. As he finished arranging the papers on his desk, Will didn't fool himself into thinking he'd have the time or focus for grading this weekend. He felt a stab of regret at agreeing to spend the night in Baltimore, Hannibal using Will's half-hearted offer of assistance to lure and trap him there until the Saturday evening soiree-- not that Will had been all that difficult to either lure or trap, to be frank. But Will's neighbor had been enlisted to let out and feed his dogs-- whom Will had apologized to profusely that morning-- so it was too late now. Nothing short of fleeing the country would allow Will to dodge the blade he had put in Hannibal's hands.

Following a long drive in Friday evening traffic and a call from Jack that amounted to little more than Will telling the agent he had no new insights on a case from earlier that week, Will tried not to appear as though he was marching to meet the firing squad when he made his way up Hannibal's walk. As expected, Hannibal greeted Will looking the picture of polished anticipation, his eyes lit from within with a golden warmth and his cheeks lifted in the expression one would make right before breaking into a smile. Will's scowl was met with Hannibal taking the weekend bag from his hands, an excellent host as always.

"Good evening," Hannibal welcomed as he closed the door behind them, then walked away without waiting for Will's surly response.

He led them upstairs to the master bedroom, a room Will realized he had rarely seen. The few nights they'd spent together had been at Will's house; Will could hardly picture Hannibal

putting him back in the guest bedroom he had stayed in previously. In fact, it would be a sort of rejection-- a difficult thought for Will to accept as having come from his own weary mind. Will logically knew this was Hannibal's home, and it was his choice where a guest did or did not sleep, but a possessive howl proclaimed that while the home was not Will's, he certainly thought of the man as his own. Will ran a hand over his face at his own profane thoughts, glad Hannibal couldn't see him torturing himself silently behind him.

Regardless of his embarrassment, it was still a faint relief when they walked past the guest bedroom and turned toward the master. Hannibal dropped the weekender bag on a chair and turned toward Will, looking entirely at ease.

"Make yourself at home, Will," he smoothly commanded. Perhaps Will wasn't as subtle as he thought. Eyeing the bag in Will's hand, he asked, "New suit?"

Will sighed fully, a tired sound, and removed his glasses, placing them neatly on top of the bag on the chair. He laid the garment bag on the foot of the bed and unzipped it, then gestured at the clothing within, saying, "My dad used to say a man ought to have one good black suit and one good blue suit."

"Funerals and weddings," Hannibal commented with a small upturning of his lips. "It's good to see my social engagements have transcended the former."

The remark and its quiet acknowledgement of Will's agitation caused Will's body to relax a bit in spite of himself. The hand that trailed from between his shoulder blades to his lower back magnified the feeling, and he leaned into the touch. He glanced at Hannibal, watched as the man looked the suit up and down, and then felt the hand and its warmth disappear as Hannibal zipped the bag back up and crossed the room to hang it in his closet. Will knew the suit was not to Hannibal's standards-- not a trace of plaid, for one thing-- but it was what Will had picked for himself with the event in mind, which seemed to be enough for now. In his pinstripe blue and white shirt and tan slacks, Hannibal looked comfortable and assured as he hung the garment bag among his own collection of bespoke suits. Will felt the tightness in his muscles soften further at the scene. Seeing firsthand both the violence and tenderness the man before him was capable of made Will's his breath catch; the lightness Will detected in Hannibal's form and step existed because of Will's presence, and the thought constricted his throat further, to the point of choking. Will knew what a dangerous game he played with himself, delighting in the tiger purring for him to the point of overlooking its fangs.

Hannibal was watching him now with a tilted head and hint of teeth, looking as though he knew precisely what Will was thinking and wholly agreeing with his assessment.

"There's much to be done," Hannibal said in an aloof tone that failed to match his expression.

Will noticed Hannibal giving him more space than he needed when he passed by toward the doorway, and Will followed close behind. Any curiosity about Hannibal's thoughts and reactions was immediately and steadily tamped down by three hours of making good on his promise to help Hannibal in the kitchen. Will spent those hours slicing and rolling and tasting when a spoon was held to his mouth. The last part, in all fairness, wasn't so painful. After 10 PM, they finally checked the last item off of Hannibal's neat to-do list and set about cleaning

the kitchen; Will washed dishes as Hannibal sanitized the island and rearranged the items in the refrigerator.

“I didn’t think you could *actually* use my help,” Will called over his shoulder as he examined the spotless blade of a paring knife.

“I’ve prepared for such events without assistance, but it is more pleasant with company,” Hannibal answered affably.

A tiny, petulant thought entered Will’s mind, reminding him that Alana helped Hannibal the last time the man had a dinner party; soon, a far more crushing thought trampled over it and reminded Will that he was a coward for not talking to Alana prior to her agreeing to attend tomorrow’s dinner. Hannibal owed her this courtesy more than Will did, but for Hannibal, there was no fun to be had-- and nothing to learn-- from a respectful, private conversation. No, Hannibal wanted to see what Alana, poised and professional as she was, would do when faced with an unpredicted situation. Will should’ve intervened; he did not and could not say way other than the desire for self-preservation.

Will’s too-long silence tipped his hand, revealing too much of his pensiveness. Breaking the quiet between them, Hannibal stated, “Skin chemistry varies from body to body. Two individuals might press a violet to their skin; on one, it is a blossom, but on the other, it is talcum powder. Our bodies alter the taste of the food we prepare just the same.”

Will turned the faucet to stop the flow of water and thought about this statement in the burdensome silence of the room. A quip about the versatile ways Hannibal used the human body in his cooking stopped on the tip of his tongue when Hannibal spoke from directly behind him, ever predatory in his steps and breathing.

“You’ve given our meal a most beautiful flavor, Will.”

A sane man would hear the words as a threat coming from the lips of the Chesapeake Ripper. Will Graham had never considered himself anything close to a sane man, nor did the majority of the psychiatric community.

“Been hanging onto that gem?” Will asked flippantly as his face flushed and he felt a tingle run down his spine. When he turned to face Hannibal, he found they were already devastatingly close. He met the other man’s eyes unabashedly.

“Do my words ring hollow to you?” a gentle voice asked with feigned hurt.

A smirk crossed Will’s lips, daring and unexpected, “I’ve always thought of myself as an acquired taste. Suitable only for unorthodox palates.”

The amber of the eyes watching Will intently was being swallowed by blackness, and Will imagined his own pupils were similarly glassy as the space between them seemed to shrink. Will kept his gaze fixed steadily on Hannibal-- had he been less distracted, he might’ve laughed at his self-proclaimed aversion to eye contact-- and thought again of tigers and leashes. Undoubtedly, while it was his own fearlessness that led him to this precarious position, it was likely that same fearlessness that would save his neck: Hannibal *appreciated*

that Will knew he should be frightened but simply wasn't for no other reason than something born within him would not allow it.

Who closed the sliver of space between them did not matter, nor did it particularly make any difference that Hannibal was the one who walked them toward the staircase while Will's finger nimbly undid each button down Hannibal's chest before they reached the top of the stairs. Their lips were damp but turned into pressed, sly grins, the overt flirtation from the kitchen coloring their contact with a certain playfulness that was unusual for both men. Yet, in the bedroom, the dim light and dark sheets along with the sight of Will's belongings placed as though they were meant to be there demanded more gravity.

With a smooth slip of his hands over broad shoulders, Hannibal's shirt was being pulled away from his skin and slipped down strong arms-- arms that would not break against the struggling of a body; the thought caused Will to shiver, though he kept Hannibal from noticing by choosing that moment to catch Hannibal's bottom lip and then suck softly. A sound between a hum and a sigh came from the man's chest as he let his shirt fall to the ground and wrapped his arms around Will, one on his back and the other working upward to hold the nape of his neck. Smiles gone now as teasing kisses turned into caressing tongues and nipping teeth, Will felt increasingly feverish, his chest burning and nerves singing under his skin. Hannibal's mouth moved to Will's neck, the spot under his ear reddening rapidly with the attention lavished upon it, and the shifted position provided enough space for Hannibal's fingers to work Will's buttons open, cooler air hitting the exposed skin. Will, meanwhile, placed his hand in a claw over one of the well-defined shoulder blades within his grasp while the other hand traveled aimlessly across the bare torso he found himself free to touch. His fingers traced the prominent outline of Hannibal's collar bone, down a chest lightly covered in hair, and across the sturdy core of a body shaped by-- and for-- hunting.

Will's thoughts were distracted by the feeling of Hannibal stroking a thumb heavily over his Adam's apple as Hanibal's fingers wrapped around to the back of Will's neck-- a mockery of strangulation; simultaneously, teeth bit testingly on the tendon at Will's shoulder before being replaced with the stroke of a soothing tongue. The sound of Hannibal's heavy breathing as he moved his mouth back to meet Will's encouraged Will's fingers to loop into the leather belt buckle they had been working toward, pulling it loose. The men's angling and adjusting left their hips bumping together passingly, not nearly enough friction as fingertips, teeth, and tongues spurred them on, building the ache between them. Will got as far as lowering the zipper on Hannibal's slacks and feeling the arousal there under his knuckles before he was walked backward, stopping as his legs met the bed. They went down together, Hannibal putting his weight forward to push Will back as Will moved his hands to cradle Hannibal's jawline, their mouths not separating until Will was fully reclined on the bed. Hannibal moved his mouth down the line of Will's sternum, then angled to let the tip of a tongue flick the firmer flesh of a nipple; Will took the opportunity to continue his task of undressing the body hovering above him, even as his focus waned. Hannibal was content to comply with Will's tugging at the waistband of his slacks and briefs, and straightened his legs to help work the fabric off of him until he was fully naked.

The singular task of not being the first one naked now accomplished, Will sunk into the ample sensations the moment offered. He perceived Hannibal's tongue on his chest, his hand working on Will's own belt at an infuriatingly leisurely pace, and, belying all of the contained

heat Hannibal exuded, the painfully hard evidence of Will's effect on him pressing into Will's thigh. Unable to resist, Will moved his leg, rocking against the erection and causing Hannibal to open his mouth and dip his forehead to Will's chest, a slow, shaky exhale blowing across Will's skin. The dark-haired man tried to not look as delighted with himself as he felt but was not terribly successful. Hannibal seemed to interpret this move as a sort of throwing down the gauntlet-- which was precisely what it was-- and sped up his work of removing the rest of Will's clothing, only pausing when Will found an angle to press against him again.

His own need now uncovered in the presence of a partner whom he both craved and felt woefully inexperienced in comparison to, Will's teasing ceased. He schooled any hesitancy that might appear on his face, even as he thought of what the next stage might be in the slow but sure progression of their physical relationship. Hannibal moved upward on the bed and laid himself to Will's side, giving him room to breathe; he brought their lips together again in slow, wet kisses, sucking lightly and brushing teasingly against Will's tongue. Hannibal's free hand came to Will's hair and smoothed it backward in small strokes. These actions were meant to distract and calm, and Will felt his body sink back into the mattress-- not having realized how much his shoulders and thighs had tensed until that moment. Will reminded himself firmly that Hannibal was not *that* kind of monster, if he was a monster at all. It seemed increasingly questionable, even in the face of stacks of evidence to the contrary.

Settling enough to once again enjoy the sensations offered by their bodies coming together, Will ran his fingertips in a ghost of a touch across Hannibal's ribs, over his waist, around his hip bone, and down his still-firm length. The ragged exhale into Will's mouth was an exquisite reward, and Will repeated the motion with more grip. The sound was a groan this time. In response, Will turned to his side so that he and Hannibal were face-to-face, chest-to-chest, hip-to-hip. He hooked one leg around Hannibal's thigh and rutted forward against him as their mouths moved together. The feeling of skin on skin and the whispers of friction tantalized their sensitive, aching flesh. Will rolled forward again and again, in a slow but regular beat that had both men panting and becoming slick as the pressure of arousal built low in their stomachs. The motion was maddening-- good but not quite enough. Feeling more brazen and controlled again, Will put his lips against Hannibal's throat, intending to work downward, but Hannibal caught him at the shoulder with a strong grip.

Will watched as Hannibal moved fluidly, propping himself up and extending his body to the bedside table. Desire beginning to eclipse his capacity for anxiety, Will tracked Hannibal's movements, panic and need washing over him in equal measure when Hannibal put the bottle of clear fluid beside them on the bed, pushed Will to his back firmly but not roughly, and planted one knee on either side of Will's body. Will looked up, blinking slowly. The mere possibility that Hannibal might want what it now seemed he so clearly intended to happen made Will stop breathing for a few dizzying seconds.

Will would be a liar if he said he hadn't spent at least a small amount of time researching the physical dynamics of the various forms of intimacy two men could engage in with one another. He would also be lying if he said he could have predicted this specific turn of events.

But then Hannibal's mouth was on his again, and a hand was stroking him with agonizing tenderness, and Will became increasingly sure he could do whatever was required if he could just feel himself unspool into relief and behold the sight of Hannibal experiencing the same.

When they broke apart to take a needed breath, Will turned his head to eye the bottle there; he looked back at Hannibal and saw blackened eyes and silent demand. He took the bottle in hand and proceeded slowly, not letting himself falter but having to actively think about what he was doing. Slickened fingers massaged tentatively across flesh until Hannibal gave a nip to Will's jugular, prompting the slide of a finger into warmth. The dark eyes watching Will closed halfway as Hannibal moved slightly, helping Will find the correct angle; Will struggled to focus on the wordless directions instead of on the hot tightness he was exploring. Hips and wrist adjusted, a second finger, then a third was added, and Will found himself transfixed by the movement of the powerful creature on top of him and the way he exhaled sharply when thoroughly stimulated from within.

When a hand firmly wrapped around Will's rigid length followed by the feeling of room-temperature liquid dousing him and being worked into his skin, all Will could hear was the sound of his own heartbeat in his ears. Hannibal looked hungry and strong on top of him, and Will wondered how even in a position like this, Hannibal was unfathomably in control; not for the first time in his life, Will felt society had deeply misled him. The glint in Hannibal's eye and the barest show of his canines caused Will fleetingly to think that perhaps Hannibal wanted this simply because of what it promised to do to Will-- particularly the night before his world changed yet again at Hannibal's hands. Will didn't have time to chase this thought, however, as he felt himself being consumed by Hannibal's body in an effortless motion.

They stayed still together for a moment, Will breathing shallowly around his racing heart and Hannibal's eyes closed entirely. Beyond the rapid rise and fall of his own chest, Will marveled at the surreal imagine of himself physically joined to the untouchable man as well as at the impossibly human sight of Hannibal's erection still prominent against Will's lower stomach. It was too much to understand in any logical manner, so Will fixated on looking up at Hannibal's face again, embarrassed now to see those depthless eyes open and watching Will's struggle. He leaned forward, gave Will a single, chaste kiss, and then moved back again, appearing nothing short of ravenous when Will's hands wrapped forcefully around the thighs on either side of his body and his breath was exhaled unevenly from his chest. Before Will had a chance to recover from the first minor movements, Hannibal started a slow rocking, pausing only once to adjust the angle with a minute roll of his hips. It took a minute for Will to actively participate, paralyzed by both his brimming desire and the uncertainty of what precisely was the *right* way to behave in the situation. Eventually, he angled his lower body upward while pulling Hannibal toward him, allowing the man on top of him to maintain his chosen position while being within Will's reach. Seeing that this repositioning did not hurt or disrupt Hannibal, Will experimented with meeting the other man's methodical grinding with careful thrusts.

Hips held tilted and meeting the established rhythm, Will carefully gauged Hannibal's reactions, even as he felt himself moving perilously close to his own edge. With the added movement from Will's controlled thrusts, Hannibal moved to support himself more heavily with the arms anchored to either side of Will's head. Next to Will's ear, a cut off moan escaped from Hannibal's lips as his head dropped to Will's shoulder momentarily.

"Hannibal…," Will started, the name a question. He wasn't certain if it was a moan of pain or pleasure.

When Hannibal answered in a thick, breathy sigh, “Will,” they resumed moving together at a less cautious tempo.

With Hannibal’s body so close, Will could sink his teeth into Hannibal’s skin, press his lips into a kiss, or seal a wet mouth around the base of his throat; Will could swallow the noises they made together, feeling them more than hearing them, and dig his fingers into Hannibal’s back. As the tight body worked around him, the second to last coherent thought Will had was how unfair it was that Hannibal always seemed to find a way to dominate any given situation; the very last coherent thought, however, was if Hannibal would be quite so composed with his name in Will’s mouth and his leaking erection in Will’s hands.

Will wrapped his fingers around Hannibal once more, this time matching the thrusts so that each time the circle of his fingers wrapped around Hannibal’s heated flesh reached the head, Will’s hips came to be flush with Hannibal’s thighs. The other man’s heavily lidded eyes and barely open mouth, breath only short pants now, encouraged Will further. Will was close-- so close, the pressure unbearable-- and he knew Hannibal was as well. He wanted nothing more than mutual destruction.

The tightening of Will’s thighs along with each muscle in his core warned of his impending orgasm. Needing to see Hannibal plummet along with him, Will put his free hand to Hannibal’s face and forced them to look at one another as he continued stroking and grinding upward.

Barely a whisper in the seconds before he came, Will said Hannibal’s name, again and again. The sound of a guttural groan and the feeling of warm liquid spilling onto his abdomen was what Will needed to finally let his head fall back as he pressed into Hannibal’s body and felt the shattering spasms of release, nothing but white behind his eyes.

They laid together unmoving for several minutes, covered in one another but exhausted.

When Hannibal finally pulled back and moved to get off of Will, the younger man held him and pressed a firm kiss to his mouth, then nuzzled against his neck. In that hazy moment, Will didn’t care if Hannibal had intended for this precise outcome or if the entire evening had been only a natural progression of their relationship; probably both, if they were honest with themselves and each other. It worked, regardless, and Will felt boneless and vaguely enamored. The phrase *biochemical reaction* pinballed around Will’s brain before being ejected from the game.

“The sheets must be changed,” Hannibal finally said, fastidiousness overcoming romance as the endorphins subsided.

A bark of a laugh escaped Will’s chest at the comment, but Hannibal couldn’t quite summon the disdain to glare considering their current state. Eventually, Hannibal herded a grumbling Will into the bathroom, where he washed up as Hannibal changed the sheets then took his turn in the bathroom as Will sunk into the clean bedding. He was half-asleep by the time Hannibal emerged and fully asleep within seconds of the bedside lamp being turned off. They slept curled together that night, Hannibal’s front pressed against Will’s back in the cool, silk sheets.

Will felt as though he had barely shut his eyes by the time he woke in the morning. It was after 9, and he had slept deeply, barely moving throughout the night. He dimly realized he wasn't alone as the bed shifted next to him and a hand carded through his curls. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Hannibal reading the news online.

"No three-course breakfast before a five-course dinner?" Will asked in a gravelly voice.

Hannibal looked him up and down fondly, though Will was certain he had to look at least disheveled and more than likely wrecked.

"Breakfast is downstairs. Only one course, though," Hannibal replied as he returned his attention to the headlines.

"Nobody's perfect," Will mumbled, turning to curl toward the other man. He noticed the quirk of a lip that hinted at Hannibal's amusement. Will closed his eyes and let his head fall back onto the pillow as he questioned teasingly, "Anything interesting happen overnight?"

"Mmm, let's see," Hannibal began lightly. "A shooting-- drug related it appears-- near the University of Virginia, a pair of pandas mated successfully in Atlanta, stock market is stable. No mention of civil unrest or birds plummeting from the sky; I believe the world has survived our sleep."

Will pulled the covers up to his chin and felt his limbs grow heavy. He was almost asleep again when Hannibal resumed speaking.

"Have you ever visited Italy, Will?"

Blue eyes opened lazily at the question.

"Can't say I have."

"Would you like to?" Hannibal posed the question as easily as if he had asked Will if he wanted cream with his coffee.

"I dislike this hypothetical situation, Dr. Lecter. What are you angling for?" Will questioned firmly but not unkindly.

Hannibal's gaze returned to Will's bright eyes, expression guarded.

"My question is practical, not philosophical," Hannibal stated plainly.

Will scanned his face and considered the question at face value-- a hazardous practice where Hannibal was concerned.

"Yes, if the circumstances were right," Will cautiously replied.

Hannibal looked back at the news site, though Will could tell he wasn't truly seeing it. After a few seconds, he asked, "What would be considered favorable circumstances?"

Will sighed and stretched out on his back, fully awake now.

“Time away from work. Someone to care for my dogs,” Will was hedging but worked up the nerve to add, “Assurance I wouldn’t feel like l was...dependent.”

Hannibal was no longer pretending to read.

“Do you worry I would manufacture that sense?”

Will caught the wry laugh bubbling from his chest-- now was not the time.

“I think it would tempt you very much up until the minute it didn’t,” Will responded honestly and without malice.

Hannibal now regarded Will with the same earlier fondness.

“I’ve fared well with considerably worse odds,” Hannibal lightly remarked, looking terribly confident for no reason Will could discern. Before Will could put a dent in the man’s scheming, Hannibal rose and assured, “Come down when you’re ready.”

Will watched Hannibal exit the room in graceful strides, a look between a smile and a frown painting Will’s features. He took his time getting ready that morning.

By afternoon, preparations for dinner were in full swing, the hired servers already rearranging furniture to Hannibal’s detailed specifications. The servers, most of whom looked to be college-aged, worked under the direction of a pair of middle-aged supervisors who checked over the team’s work with painful attention to detail; they held a black binder with the initials H.L. emblazoned on the side, and Will could now understand why Hannibal seemed to use only this company. The scene was marginally less daunting than it had been the first night Will attended one of Hannibal’s parties, but being noticed and referred to as “Sir” reverentially proved far more unnerving than solely being an attendee. When one of the young men clad entirely in black attire asked Will whether he preferred the servers refill wine glasses during the cocktail hour or replace them with fresh, prefilled glasses, Will realized with horror that he was viewed by the serving staff as one of two hosts.

“Ah,” Will smartly replied to the young man. “Let me get back to you.”

When he relayed the question to Hannibal, the man only confirmed Will’s dawning suspicion by replying, “Whichever you prefer, Will. You must learn to relax.”

Will restrained himself from punching Hannibal squarely in his deferential face and told the server uneasily to just refill the damn glasses instead of creating a useless stack of dirty wine glasses they’d have to clean later.

By five-thirty, an hour out from the start time, Will was in his new suit-- still underdressed compared to Hannibal’s usual crowd-- and struggling to tame his hair into something resembling neatness. He left the suit jacket upstairs and went downstairs to help however he could, even if that amounted to acting as Hannibal’s captive audience for his culinary theatrics. Will needed to feel helpful more than Hannibal actually needed his assistance at this point in preparations, and both men recognized this fact without acknowledging it. Hannibal gave Will a white apron to protect his clothing and set him to the task of shaving

potatoes into paper-thin slices while Hannibal worked with setting the meat for the entree, whose origin Will did not ask about, to a slow braise.

The cooking routine felt familiar between them and did somewhat soothe Will's quickly fraying nerves. Still, when the bell rang announcing the first guest, Will couldn't keep a woeful, "Oh, God," from crossing his lips.

Hannibal gave a closed-mouth smile but did not look up from his work.

Will looked at his watch: Ten minutes early. Alana. He could feel it in his bones and regretted once more that he had not taken the high road and given her forewarning. He simultaneously regretted not giving Hannibal strict parameters around what did and did not constitute acceptable behavior together among friends, for as much decorum as Hannibal had, he also had a vicious streak that Will wasn't entirely certain wouldn't win out over his sense of propriety. Will looked back at the potatoes and continued slicing.

Within seconds, Alana materialized in the doorway, undeniably attractive in a knee-length plum dress with a sweetheart neckline and long sleeves. Will scolded the jealous jolt that twisted in his stomach; it was juvenile and unnecessary.

"Good evening, Alana. I was so pleased you could attend this evening on such short notice. You look lovely," Hannibal greeted and complimented without giving Alana time to react beyond a slight blush hidden by an exaggerated sigh.

"Flattery already? Should I be concerned?"

Alana said it jokingly, but she wasn't wrong. Hannibal raised his eyebrows and gave his mysterious, charming smile, then continued his work. With the meat cooking, he was now speedily finishing caprese salad hors d'oeuvres that would have wilted and become soggy had they been arranged earlier

"Hello, Will," Alana greeted, friendly enough even as she unquestionably evaluated why he was already present in the kitchen and, judging by the growing tower of potato slices, had been there for some time. "Good to see you."

"You, too," Will returned, matching her tone. He could feel satisfaction radiating from Hannibal as the trio sussed out who was jealous of whom and why.

"Do you need help?" Alana asked genially, directing the question to Hannibal but glancing covertly at Will as well.

That maddeningly satisfied closed-mouth grin still frozen on Hannibal's face, he looked up under his eyelashes at Alana, then over at Will, then back to Alana.

"I believe we have the situation well in hand," Hannibal answered, then looked back down in a polite gesture of dismissal.

Will stuck to the potatoes.

He could feel Alana scrutinizing the situation in its entirety, the context of each previous conversation they'd had about his and Hannibal's close friendship simmering again. He wondered what it would take for Alana to reach a boil; Will knew that if he was thinking this, Hannibal had already identified a litany of strategies for driving her to that point without opening himself up to blame.

"Will?" Hannibal called, drawing Will's and Alana's attention. "Would you retrieve balsamic vinegar? The San Giacomo?"

Relieved to be able to turn away from Hannibal's disingenuousness and Alana's growing confusion, Will went to the far cabinet where a row of balsamic vinegars was stored and quickly plucked the rounded bottle of San Giacomo from the shelf. It was an imported bottle that Hannibal had told him, as part of Will's informal and unsolicited culinary training, was to be used with raw ingredients and only then to contrast with-- and thus highlight-- inherent flavors. Will recalled Hannibal promising strawberries with this same balsamic vinegar when spring turned to summer again.

Will placed the bottle down near Hannibal but did not get too close, wary of the man's intentions. Hannibal barely looked up, though, and he thanked Will without the slightest hint of flirtation.

"I'm going to get a glass of wine," Alana announced to the room, her voice off-kilter to Will's ears.

"Excellent idea," Hannibal commented.

An odd expression crossed Alana's face at that, and she left the room with a furrowed brow and one hand planted on a hip. Hannibal was already giving Will a new task before he had time to retrace the conversation and determine what Alana now knew and *how* she knew it.

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

> My tentative hope is to have this story completed by Christmas. Thank you all for continuing to read along as well as for your wonderful comments. They truly make my day when I read them. 💗 💗 💗

Will had not been dismissed from the kitchen so much as his skill level was outpaced by the tasks at hand within thirty minutes of Alana's arrival. Weighing his options-- risk ruining a dish or face the growing crowd-- he had the sense of a man being offered hanging or lethal injection. He decided he preferred to know his outcome rather than wondering if the rope would snap, so he slipped his blue suit jacket back on, still forgoing the tie Hannibal had helpfully brought downstairs, and wandered into the dark study to pour himself a glass of something stouter than wine.

While he couldn't in good conscience remain hidden until Hannibal emerged to play ringmaster of the circus he'd arranged, Will did his damndest to avoid eye contact with each passing server, all of whom seemed to look to him for approval, and made his way to the foyer to pretend he was greeting new guests. If he avoided Alana Bloom, who sat on the couch in the living room flipping through a book on Spanish architecture, that was purely coincidental. When he thought of Alana now, he found himself spinning in circles:
She was a good person; she was only human.

She cared; her way of caring for Will bordered on patronizing.

She grappled with ethics as a professional; she struggled with jealousy in directions Will couldn't quite discern.

As guests trickled in, Will remained seated in one of the satin-finished chairs in the foyer observed and politely nodding at those who deigned to acknowledge him. It was interesting how the couples seemed to arrive spaced within minutes of one another but never at the same time; he wondered with detached amusement if the pairs would spot another duo of guests entering the house and then drive around the block to buy themselves a few minutes of separation. A woman in an ankle-length emerald dress with a boatneck collar passed through Will's sight line followed closely by her husband, whose checked tie picked up the precise hue of his wife's gown. She glided toward the living room, drawn there by whatever golden threads seemed to lead each newly arrived couple to the space. The woman paused a few feet beyond Will and twirled around to her spouse, the petite woman's sudden movement causing the large man behind her to stop in his tracks.

"Darling," she purred, though Will heard a growl in the sound. "Are you sure you locked the car?"

The man looked down at her with the weary expression of a man who had been asked this question as often as they had gone anywhere together in at least a decade.

“Of course,” he flatly replied.

The woman put a hand on her hip and sighed loudly, then said, “Don’t get touchy. You remember what happened the last time we were invited to one of Dr. Lecter’s parties.”

The man looked heavenward and grumbled, “It took twenty minutes to get my phone. Twenty minutes! The man was a surgeon-- he understood.”

A doubtful noise formed in the back of the woman’s throat, but before she could argue, a server offered her a glass of wine, which she took with a thin smile before continuing on toward the hum of the living room, leaving her husband standing in her wake. The man gave Will a look that implored sympathy. Will glanced at the man’s tie, tipped his glass of scotch in his direction, and took a deep sip. By the time Will looked up again at the space the man had occupied, he was gone. As the minutes ticked by, a handful of guests entered, a few of them giving Will a once-over but otherwise not paying him much attention. Mrs. Komeda, a woman Will remembered from Hannibal’s previous party, was the sole exception; her memory of him seemed focused on their shared love of dogs, and even Will Graham could admit to feeling his heart melt just a touch when she insisted on showing him photos of her newest bichon frise puppy, Matilda. However, the kindly Mrs. Komeda was eventually drawn into the lion’s den of the living room with the rest of the guests, and Will remained fixed in his seat, reluctant guardian of the foyer.

For several minutes after Mrs. Komeda and her husband entered the home, nobody new arrived. Will sighed into his scotch and checked his watch: 7:17. Forty-seven minutes since the formal start of the evening; thirteen minutes until dinner.

It felt like an eternity.

Will had almost summoned the fortitude to spend the last ten minutes of the cocktail hour, which was supposed to be a time dedicated to socializing and ice breaking before the formality of dinner, in the company of the other guests, but as soon as he stood, a familiar voice pierced the air-- and his soul.

“Will Graham!”

Will’s frown remained carved into the lines of his face as his eyes shot toward the doorway and absorbed the image of Frederick Chilton in a dark brown suit and matching overcoat. The coiffed man looked entirely too happy to see Will; it was discomforting.

“I did not realize you and Dr. Lecter are acquainted,” Frederick commented with unearned smugness as he approached Will. Chilton continued speaking, examining Will’s face as though he was a car crash instead of a man. “You must tell me how Hannibal wormed his way into the lobes of your brain. I understand it is quite a feat.”

Will glared from under a heavy brow. It was a cold anger-- not one that would bring color to his chest or heat to his stomach.

“Our association is not academic,” Will replied shortly.

“Not yet,” Chilton confidently disagreed. “Case study of a recalcitrant subject often begins to resemble a courtship more than research. Respond too eagerly to the serenade and you may find Dr. Lecter has wooed you into publication. Then, we will all know the notes that must be reached to undo the bindings of your thoughts. It is a tad unsavory, is it not?”

Will’s eyes read Frederick’s face as he spoke: bravado in the curve of his mouth, provocation in the lift of his brows, deceit in the shift of his eyes. He interpreted Hannibal’s interactions with Will through the lens of his own desires, and Chilton now sought to create fissures between what he perceived to be a shrewd psychiatrist and a rather choice subject of study. Will’s flash of anger twisted into humor as the extent of Chilton’s misguided arrogance dawned on him. He thought of what else about Hannibal that Chilton might find unsavory.

With a trace of a dark grin, Will responded, “Hannibal has no intention of sharing my thoughts with the rest of the ivory tower.”

Chilton’s expression dropped for a flash of a second, his eyes darting across Will’s subdued gaze as he searched for a clue. The rapid tapping of dress shoes on wood pulled the doctor’s attention away from Will to a point over his shoulder; the younger man knew he would find Hannibal there, summoned either by the nearing of the dinner announcement or the sound of Chilton’s voice carrying through the rooms. The straightening of Chilton’s spine and lifting of his chin confirmed what Will already assumed.

“Frederick,” Hannibal’s congenial, accented voice greeted. “I had begun to think you forgot your commitment to this evening’s dinner.”

Chilton swallowed hard, and Will stepped aside to let the men face each other fully. He noticed that Hannibal was dressed for dinner now in a suit that was far less gauche than Will would have thought for such an event. The jacket, waistcoat, and slacks were matching matte stone gray with a blue and white striped shirt and blue paisley tie underneath. There was probably some sort of dress code related to spring and color schemes-- hell, maybe even the position of the stars-- but Will’s primary takeaway was that he looked a touch more like Hannibal and less like Dr. Lecter than he had expected, which was welcome in the moment. Sartorial choices pushed aside, Will turned back to Chilton, who was composing his defense.

“I was running a bit late this evening due to work commitments. Situations arose unexpectedly. I would not presume to bore you with the details,” Frederick answered primly.

Hannibal nodded with a raised eyebrow that indicated he knew Chilton was lying but was not going to call him on it.

“I sleep more soundly knowing the most ill among us receive your dedicated care,” Hannibal commented on Chilton’s falsehood in a complimentary tone that made Chilton squirm. As if in afterthought, Hannibal brightly added, “How *is* Dr. Gideon?”

Will may have imagined it, but it seemed Frederick Chilton turned slightly green at the mention.

Chilton exhaled a disbelieving laugh. “Dr. Gideon is being treated with a pharmacopeia of antipsychotics and will remain under twenty-four hour surveillance by two armed guards until the day he is removed from my facility.”

A pleasant but unmoved expression fixed Hannibal’s features into what could only generously be called a smile. His eyes dropped to Chilton’s stomach then drew slowly back up to the shorter man’s face. “Wise, all things considered. May I take your coat?”

Will’s head swiveled back to Chilton, in no way hiding his enjoyment of Chilton’s unease. He watched as Frederick shrugged off his coat roughly, all the while complaining.

“I am glad my misfortune has served as a source of entertainment for you both,” Frederick huffed and handed over the coat. “A maniac breaking free from prison and carving his doctor in two is certainly the spectacle-- at least that is what I have gathered. Forgive me if I cannot view it as such.”

“You’re calling your new book *Scalpels in the Moonlight*,” Will remarked, his eyebrows cocked in challenge. Hannibal tipped his head toward Chilton with what was beginning to look more like an actual grin, albeit closed-mouth and contained.

An exhale flared Frederick’s nostrils, but his shoulders relaxed. “Two thousand copies have already been preordered.”

Ever the good host, Hannibal finished smoothing over Chilton’s wrinkled feelings, saying, “You must tell the other guests about your harrowing ordeal.”

Hannibal turned toward the coat closet but paused and looked directly at Will.

“Will, could you check that the place settings are in order while I see to Frederick?”

It was a reasonable request. It was also spoken loudly enough that Frederick Chilton heard it, processed it with a near audible clicking of mental gears, and immediately lit up like a child on Christmas morning, all sullenness forgotten. Will’s response was to walk silently toward the dining room, give the table a cursory once-over-- yes, there were both glasses and silverware arranged neatly around chargers in what was presumably the correct order-- and then slip into the living room with the other guests before he could draw any further attention to himself. He scanned the crowd to inventory who was among them now that everyone was together and buzzing anxiously about what might be served that evening. There were fifteen present in total, himself and Hannibal included. He recognized Alana and Frederick, of course, as well as Mrs. Komeda and, to a lesser degree, her husband. The woman with the green dress and her voluntarily browbeaten husband already seemed like acquaintances although Will did not know their names. The unnamed couple was among a group of three other men and two women, all of whom were dressed exquisitely and somehow managed to look simultaneously honored to be in Hannibal’s home and terribly bored with one another.

Across the room, a curvaceous blonde woman in her late forties wore a becoming high-necked black lace dress and patent black leather heels. She looked familiar-- from the previous dinner party, Will assumed. The man she was speaking to, though, Will was sure he did not know. The man looked to be in his thirties and was objectively incredibly good

looking; he possessed the sort of tanned, dark-haired, square-jawed charm reserved for action movies and the covers of romance novels. He was a man who would be noticed wherever he went. Sipping the scotch he had spent most of the evening thus far mostly nursing, Will wondered what it would take to kill someone like the brawny man. Was he a good fighter or had he relied on his size and charisma to avoid altercations? In that scenario, he would be a peacock facing a lion. But maybe he was skilled after all and knew how to use his weight and muscle to bend a body to his will, bones cracking between meaty hands. Would Will be able to kill him? Would *Hannibal* be able to kill him? Will had never seen Hannibal kill; he had only seen the evidence of it. The man across the room was bigger than Hannibal, but Hannibal was cut from sharper stone. It was a heated, consuming thought, and Will brought a hand to his eyes to rub it away.

When he reopened his eyes, he caught Alana's gaze. She was watching him, waiting for him to look up at her. Before she could move toward him, as he knew she would, Hannibal appeared in the doorway-- 7:30 on the dot, no surprise-- and thanked his guests for coming as he ushered them to the dining room. Will was the last out other than Hannibal himself, and he didn't miss Frederick craning his head back with all the subtlety of an emu to catch a glimpse of the two men walking together. The table was set with Hannibal at its head, naturally, and Will to his side. To Hannibal's other hand, once again, was Mrs. Komeda and her husband; Will guessed this was for his benefit more than Hannibal's since Will and Mrs. Komeda at least had the singular topic of "dogs" in common. Noticeably, Alana was not seated next to Will this time; in fact, she was at the opposite end of the table-- a fact both Will and Frederick seemed to notice at the same instant judging by how Chilton's eyes darted from the head of the table to where Alana sat near the end. The blonde woman was Will's other dining companion this evening, which made him curious as to what Hannibal's game was.

As everyone found their seats, Hannibal stood behind his chair and the servers flanked the table. For a moment, Will envisioned the black-clad servers uncovering their trays and revealing bleeding, pulsing hearts as the guests clapped; they would place the bone white china on the silver chargers and, as they backed away, they would slit each guest's throat until the table was covered by a layer of blood deep enough to splash his fingers in. Hannibal would stand at the head of the table as he did now, poised and regal in his fine suit.

Will nudged the scotch away and took a sip of water as Hannibal began speaking.

"Another winter has passed, and I am pleased to find my table graced by old friends."

Will struggled not to roll his eyes at the pretentiousness.

"I do not pretend my lectures on the culinary arts are the reason for your attendance, although you still may not escape the evening unscathed." The guests laughed while Will tamed his own frown. "*Bon appetit.*"

As Hannibal seated himself, the guests applauded while the servers descended, presenting the first course. Although Will knew to expect the shock of crimson steak tartare, he found himself stilled by it while the table fawned over the small, rounded scoop of meat placed alongside a golden gougere, the two items contrasting in color and texture while matching in size and shape. Across from Will, Mrs. Komeda raised a comically small bite to her painted red lips, closed her eyes in ecstasy, and proclaimed, "Divine!"

A murmur of agreement went around the table, and Will found himself wishing he and Alana weren't in such an awkward position with one another. He thought she'd appreciate his refusal to participate in the stroking of Hannibal's ego more than anyone else at the table. Perhaps it was because of Will's stubbornness that Hannibal waited until the younger man took his first bite to demur, "I cannot accept your compliments alone-- every dish you taste tonight has Will's hand in it as well."

Hannibal's too-kind smile and the turning of heads in his direction made Will swallow without tasting.

"You assisted at Dr. Lecter's last dinner party, too, didn't you?" the woman next to him asked conversationally.

Will heard Chilton mutter softly under his breath, "Graham certainly seems to know his way around Lecter's kitchen."

Alana's eyes fixed on Frederick, and she coolly agreed, "Yes, he does."

"Hannibal!" the woman in the green dress exclaimed before Alana and Frederick's conversation could spread to the rest of the table. "Have you been hosting secret parties without us?"

Her husband took a long swig of wine beside her.

A disgustingly charming smile pulling his features into one of his many masks, Hannibal looked toward the woman in the green dress. "Josephine, I assure you this is my first gathering since autumn. How dare you think such awful things of me," he teased.

The blonde woman was still staring at Will, awaiting an answer.

"I was Hannibal's audience, not his assistant," Will replied honestly. That was the night Hannibal had diagnosed him via scent with encephalitis, and his focus had been on surviving dinner while quieting the pounding within his skull.

The blonde woman smiled at him, teeth straight and unnaturally white. It was a sweet, unassuming smile nonetheless. She looked at Will but bent her neck enough to peak at Hannibal as she said, "You must supply all of the humility in the relationship."

It was an off-handed joke-- harmless, a bit pat-- but the word *relationship* was a dog whistle for the table. Most of the guests were eager to receive a small glimpse into Hannibal's private life; if they were lucky, they could even walk away from the evening with some tidbits of exclusive gossip to dole out sparingly among those in their social circle who were not blessed with an invitation. Alana, meanwhile, resembled a fed-up parent awaiting a guilty teenager's explanation for why he broke curfew, and Frederick looked like he was itching to take notes.

"An even exchange for his cooking," Will responded and adjusted the napkin in his lap. The words left a trace of ambiguity that both comforted Will and made him feel like he was, in just this one instance, the crueler half of their partnership.

Mrs. Komeda unintentionally alleviated Will's guilt for him in short order.

"Time passes so quickly anymore, doesn't it?" she asked the table, looking around at the others who nodded their heads in sociable agreement. She looked back toward the head of the table. "It must be near six months now, wouldn't you say?"

Will stared at the woman blankly. Then, he slowly put his fork down, taking care not to drop it or wrap his knuckles around it in a fist. He felt cold dripping into his stomach even as his face warmed; he knew there were eyes on him but refused to meet them. If Hannibal was so excited about assembling the firing squad, let him face them first. The meaning of the words registered after the initial wave of discomfort, and Will's appetite vanished as he counted the months and realized that other than the time they weren't speaking-- *because Hannibal left Will a love letter in the form of Freddie Lounds' flesh,*-- they indeed had been in some sort of a relationship for almost half of a year. While a dinner party was neither the place nor the time for an existential crisis, the realization that Will's second-longest relationship and certainly his most intense was with an actual serial who was still liable to kill and eat him-- not necessarily in that order-- drowned out all other thoughts.

"I must ask you to remember all of my important dates for me," Hannibal answered for them both without missing a beat, winking at Mrs. Komeda.

"What are some of those important dates? If you do not mind me asking," Chilton piped up. His question went without reply.

One of the women who had earlier ignored Will as he sat statuelike in the foyer now glanced inquiringly between them. "Will, is it? I haven't seen you before. How did you and Hannibal meet?"

Will shot a look down the table to evaluate the woman's expression and found no malice. He also caught Alana putting her empty wine glass back on the table. He was not in the proper headspace for this conversation.

"Work."

Alana clearing her throat did little to muffle the sharp laugh that escaped it; Will figured Alana had earned at least that much and didn't flinch at the sound. The table waited in silence.

"Will teaches and consults at Quantico," Hannibal interjected. "The director of the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit requested I look at a case that Will was also tasked with examining."

Noises of excitement went around the table at the mention of the FBI, even though at least a few of the guests had been told of Will's employment at the previous dinner party. Alana's voice, clear and emotionless, cut above the sounds.

"And then?"

Hannibal's expression did not change as he looked Alana in the eye from his place presiding over the table. He lifted his brows in question when she did not immediately elaborate.

"And then what happened? You can't leave us with only half a story, Hannibal," Alana explained, not looking away.

Chilton scooted forward as far as he could without getting his tie in his food and added, "Oh, yes, please go on."

The others at the table looked between the two with a mixture of confusion and intrigue, sensing the tension but nosy all the same. Only Frederick looked utterly unperturbed by Alana's challenge; his food was untouched, and he had dropped all pretense of eating now. Hannibal leaned back comfortably in his chair and caught the stem of his wine glass between his middle and ring fingers, lightly twirling it. His eyes warmed, and the relaxation apparent in his demeanor calmed the room.

"We went to Minnesota for the case. I made Will breakfast, and in return, he told me he didn't find me interesting," Hannibal recalled with a fondness that Will couldn't distinguish as either completely superficial or completely genuine. The mood at the table shifted further from the earlier burst of tension as a few guests laughed and shot Will playful looks. "Will identified the perpetrator and, unfortunately, had to use his firearm to save an innocent life. We discussed what occurred that day and then went on to discuss countless other matters. Here we are today. I don't believe there's much else to reveal."

Will had been studying Hannibal as the man spoke into his wine glass. With all of the glaring omissions, it was almost a nice story-- dramatic but with a neat, happy ending. It was the kind of story the guests would remember and tell their friends when they ran out of better things to talk about. Considering the dueling realities, Will couldn't deny he preferred the truth, bodies and all. Watching Hannibal stare into the burgundy of his wine, Will wondered if that's what the man found there-- the missing pieces of their tale. Hannibal's spin purposefully put Alana in a disadvantaged position: She was losing her ability to establish a moral high ground as the group grew more attached to the narrative they were being sold. Alana now had to conceal any further jabs under the veil of friendly interest.

"Love at first sight?" Josephine, the green dress, asked wistfully while her husband openly rolled his eyes.

A line of pointed teeth appeared as Hannibal responded, "In a way."

Will pulled his scotch back to him.

When he chanced a look around the table, Will saw the others were watching Hannibal with admiration and affection as the man continued casually swirling his wine, appearing to be oblivious in his reverie. However, when his amber eyes at last peered out from the head of the table, they focused clearly on Alana.

"It sounds like you deserve each other," Alana said with cloying sweetness. The smile in Hannibal's eyes was genuine now, without question. "It must have been difficult to negotiate

your personal and professional boundaries. I would struggle immensely had I known someone as a therapist before becoming *friendly*."

Alana let the others wonder what she meant instead of attacking directly; she, too, could work in the medium of ambiguity. The ripples of tension ran across the surface of the table as the servers returned to clear the plates from the first course. Will saw Frederick's eyes gleam, a new book already half-written in his mind based on Alana's suggestion alone-- a tawdry expose on the FBI, perhaps.

Will inhaled slowly, then let his mouth move through what he hoped was a small, polite smile. "Negotiation for that which you deem valuable somehow feels less taxing."

He paused, letting his words soothe the table in their quiet lack of violence, and steeled himself to continue good-naturedly.

"Alana is right-- boundaries are necessary. All we can offer is transparency." He waited again and looked directly into Alana's wide eeys, her disbelief triggered as soon as the word *transparency* crossed Will's lips. Still looking at Alana, Will added with as much light-heartedness as he could affect, "You would've enjoyed Jack Crawford's reaction."

"The FBI director I mentioned earlier," Hannibal chimed in to clarify for the table.

Any tension remaining in the group dissipated at Will and Hannibal's casualness. They didn't know the players involved but could gather a colleague had been surprised by the relationship-- a harmless anecdote. Alana, of course, could read the implication clearly: *One less card to play.*

"I, for one, would love to hear Agent Crawford's take on this--" Chilton chewed on the word he was going to say before correcting himself "--fortuitous romance."

The servers returned with the next course-- a shaved vegetable salad-- thwarting Chilton's efforts. Hannibal occupied the table by extrapolating upon the origins of the vegetables and crumbled cheeses as well as the process of candying the pork belly liberally sprinkled atop each plate. The dish truly was a salad only in the loosest sense of the word. Wine glasses were refilled, and the table turned to easier chatter, seeming to agree to drop the matter of their host's personal life for the time being.

Midway through the course, the blonde next to Will turned to him once more and held out her hand. "I didn't introduce myself earlier. I'm Serena Barnett."

Will shook her head while the last name bandied about in his brain. No wonder the woman looked familiar.

She blushed and continued, "We didn't really at Hannibal's last dinner party. My husband-- well, my late husband-- he wasn't very kind to you that evening. I don't know what the etiquette is for making small talk with someone your deceased spouse was rude to..." She ended weakly on a nervous laugh, and Will gave her a sympathetic look.

“I think you’re doing fine, for what it’s worth,” Will replied. “I worked the case. I’m very sorry.”

Serena nodded at the vagueries, seemingly comforted by them.

“I can’t imagine how difficult all of this must be,” Will offered. He was terrible at comforting strangers even when he hadn’t eaten part of their dearly departed.

Serena’s eyes dropped briefly to her lap, then back up to Will’s face. Her dark eyelashes swept far down her cheeks. *False eyelashes, thick mascara,* Will observed. *No tears.* He realized she looked guilty.

She spoke again in a hushed voice. “Honestly, I’m relieved to be here. I couldn’t stand to spend another day cooped up inside. Everyone is treating me like an invalid.”

Will gave her a half smile and responded, “There’s no correct way to grieve.”

Serena laughed dryly and took a sip of her white wine. “Tell that to my mother-in-law.”

The unexpected burst of dark humor amused and confused Will in equal measure, and he took a bite to give himself time to consider Serena’s words. However, by the time he was done chewing, Serena had struck up conversation with the Adonis beside her once more. Will allowed himself a moment of quiet, then turned to Hannibal, who seemed to be waiting for Will to join his conversation with the Komedas. Their discussion of landscaping was not one Will had much to contribute to, but he didn’t mind listening and adding in the occasional tidbit of practical advice. He was relatively certain the Komedas would flood their lawn in their quest to build a koi pond if they didn’t consult well-vetted professionals, but Will didn’t think that would be a problem for the pair.

The third course was apple-glazed pork served on a round of paper-thin potato slices, which Will was inordinately proud of. Will ate and listened more than he spoke as the conversation turned to sustainable pork farming, heritage hog breeding, and, finally, boar hunting. Will occasionally caught Alana’s eye-- she looked worried, not angry-- and determinedly avoided Frederick’s eager gaze. The green couple seemed to be growing more affectionate with one another in direct correlation to the flow of wine, and Serena and the man next her appeared to know one another quite well already, judging by the hand on her knee under the table. All things considered, it wasn’t the worst evening of Will’s life-- not that that particular bar was very high-- and he had enough space to grow more curious about what surprises Hannibal had reserved. Serena Barnett was certainly one.

When the dishes had been cleared from the entree and all that remained to be served was dessert, Hannibal stood and politely dismissed himself from the table: “If you would excuse me, I must check on our final course.”

Will thought distantly about how formally Hannibal approached and exited the table. He was recalling Hannibal’s superficially charming opening remarks when a particular phrase resurfaced in his mind: *I am pleased to find my table graced by old friends.*

Hannibal was already near the doorway as Will nearly leapt from his seat and mumbled, “I’ll help.”

Hannibal didn’t question or deny him, and while nobody seemed to think anything of the pair exiting together-- why would they?-- Frederick looked like he would gladly chew off his own hand if it meant he could tag along behind them. In the kitchen, away from their guests’ prying ears, Hannibal turned to Will with mild eyes, softer than they’d been minutes earlier among the others. Will approached him and stood inappropriately close, chests almost touching. He brought his head beside Hannibal’s, the slightly taller man tilting his head forward in response so that they were cheek-to-cheek and Will’s lips almost touched Hannibal’s ear. The servers that buzzed in and out pointedly avoided looking at them, which was precisely what Will intended-- although he could acknowledge it wasn’t an unpleasant position to be in regardless of intention.

“Did we feed Serena her husband?”

Hannibal turned his face just enough that Will could feel the curve of his mouth against his cheek. Will knew that just because he had thought there was nothing left of Cal Barnett, it didn’t mean Hannibal hadn’t stored away some pieces for his special guest.

“Are she and the underwear model having an affair?”

Warm air puffed against Will’s skin in a silent chuckle.

“*Were*. It’s no longer an affair.”

“Equivocation ought to be a capital offense,” Will murmured, lips brushing the smooth skin of the other man’s neck.

Will’s initial desire to gain some clarity as to Hannibal’s goals for the evening-- other than driving a wedge between him and Alana and disseminating news of their relationship to all of the East coast via Dr. Chilton-- was flagging. Proximity and touch still swayed Will more than he’d admit, even when he was the instigator.

“Oh.”

The two men took a small step apart and turned toward the doorway where Frederick Chilton stood.

“I was looking for the washroom and fear I became turned around.”

Chilton looked neither fearful nor lost.

“Have you found your way now, Frederick?” Hannibal questioned glibly.

“Yes, I can find my way from here,” Chilton answered but did not move. An unabashed smile spread across his face and he released a sigh straight to the heavens. “I really must thank you both for a wonderful evening.”

They watched Chilton exit, lighter on his feet than a man who had been disemboweled had any right to be. Will shot Hannibal a look that wordlessly pronounced *You did this*. Hannibal read the expression as well as what would eventually come after it: *Do you plan on killing him?*

But that conversation was meant for darkened rooms and empty houses, and they had dessert to serve.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

I'm alive, and so is this story!

▩▩▩▩▩NSFW: In the words of Bryan Fuller, "They flip."▩▩▩▩▩

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will and Hannibal returned to the table together. When they left the kitchen, Will experienced a moment of passing concern where he wondered if one of them should wait a beat before reentering the room; realizing that this pitiful gesture of subterfuge was not at all necessary fed the warmth in Will's stomach that had lit during their brief conversation in the kitchen. Frederick did not hide how enthusiastically he turned to watch the men, eyes following them every step of the way to their seats, nor did Alana make any great attempt to disguise her disapproval. The chatter at the table seemed to not have changed much during the few minutes they were gone, and Will was both relieved and disappointed at that. He was ready for the evening to be over.

The line of servers with delicate white plates featuring a perfect stack of buttery crust, braised peaches, and nearly frozen sage whipped cream elicited the expected round of praise from the guests. Even Josephine and her husband, who had all but come to sit in one another's laps after multiple glasses of wine, broke apart long enough to gush about Hannibal's eye for both flavors and presentation-- Will didn't trust himself enough to meet Hannibal's smug gaze at that particular observation.

Mrs. Komeda, affable as always, renewed the conversation as soon as the plates hit the table.

"Frederick, I've heard you are working on a book. Is that correct?"

Chilton's chest visibly puffed as he shot a smarmy smile at the woman.

"It is, indeed. There was a great deal of curiosity following my encounter with Dr. Gideon, and I thought it best to tell the story in my own words."

"Oh, my, that's the topic? I had assumed it was a professional piece," another guest further down the table remarked.

"It is, in a way. I only encountered Dr. Gideon through my work-- I do not expect our paths would have otherwise crossed. Besides, I cannot discuss Abel without delving into the finer points of identity disorders and psychosis," Frederick elaborated airily.

"Precarious ground," Hannibal observed, then took a perfectly sliced bite of peach.

Chilton frowned.

“Beg your pardon?” he asked, a note of offense already creeping in.

Hannibal leisurely chewed and took a sip of water, then responded, “Writing about patients. One must mind the ethical concerns.”

Will’s hand twitched with the need to run over his face. He did not dare look at Alana. Frederick opened and closed his mouth, surprise evident in the height of his arched brows.

Chilton eventually replied in a clipped voice. “I should send you an advance copy as a debt of gratitude for your sound advice.”

Hannibal’s smile in response caused Chilton’s cheeks to redden as the others at the table, save Alana and Will, waited to hear more about Frederick’s book. Under any other circumstances, Frederick would have flourished under such a spotlight, but he remained flustered for a moment too long.

“I read about you in the paper,” the muscle-bound man next to Serena Barnett commented. “You were gutted. Had to hold your own intestines like a fruit basket, right?”

“That is a rather colorful interpretation, but yes, I did sustain a severe abdominal injury,” Frederick haughtily answered. “I do not recall your name.”

“Miles,” the man said in response, and Will made a mental note to not refer to him as “the underwear model” again.

“Miles, I must ask what sorts of *papers* you have been reading,” Frederick coldly shot out at the young man.

Serena spoke for him, “Miles is a true crime buff. He reads anything he can get his hands on about the topic.”

“Is that how you have come to know Mrs. Barnett?” Chilton asked smarmily. “Her being so recently widowed, I cannot imagine another reason for your association.”

Serena emitted a disbelieving laugh; Miles’ formidable body seemed to clench visibly as he leaned forward menacingly.

“What are you implying?” the young man demanded.

Frederick looked with wide, innocent eyes as he said, “Nothing at all. I am merely inquiring as to how you and Serena Barnett came to be friendly.”

The others at the table, smelling blood in the water, looked between the men. Frederick Chilton, for all of his many faults, was established in their circle, and for the first time, Will noticed how Serena had not interacted long with anyone but Miles and Will himself that evening.

Josephine's husband waved a hand, "Oh, settle down, big guy. Frederick is always poking around, trying to figure people out."

His wife nodded vigorously and added, "It's not personal."

Will wasn't sure how Chilton's questions could be construed as anything but personal, yet he felt no need to intervene.

"Issues managing anger appropriately may be treated with therapy," Chilton noted to no one in particular.

Serena squeezed Miles' sizable arm, keeping him in place.

"I so look forward to reading your book, Frederick," Mrs. Komeda remarked, unflappable. "You know, I'm a writer, too."

The smile Will hid behind a fork of dessert was genuine and entirely for the woman across from him who had begun to ramble about self-publishing and the difficulties of reaching a digital audience. Once the servers returned to collect the final round of empty plates, the guests were beginning to stretch and yawn, conversation dying down once more. Hannibal lorded over the table, unbearably satisfied.

"It's been an absolute treat, Hannibal," a woman at the opposite end said too loudly.

"Yes, just wonderful!" Josephine enthused.

Her husband articulately added, "No complaints."

The others at the table agreed in grateful nods and jumbled compliments that forced Will to keep from scowling. It was all for show-- a hidden plea to be invited back for one more party, one more dinner, one more anything that would put them in Hannibal's hallowed sphere.

"As always, this evening has been entirely my pleasure," Hannibal demurred.

When the host stood, the others followed suit, stretching and smoothing their attire. Relief flooded Will's body at the sight of the dining room slowly emptying of guests, returning to the space he knew and had spent so many evenings in. His relief was short-lived, though, when Alana circled the table and sidled up to Will, walking out of the room toward the foyer alongside him.

"I'm worried," she whispered.

Hannibal was already at the front door ensuring guests were given their coats and engaging in the last bits of small-talk required of him. Will knew this was also another opportunity for his ego to be fully stroked, though Hannibal wouldn't admit such a thing, and thus not a task to be outsourced to a hired server.

Will sighed, tired and trapped.

"You've expressed that with incredible clarity, Alana," he said flatly.

Alana turned to him, arms crossed over her chest.

“And you’ve yet to give me a reason not to be concerned, Will.”

Her eyes drew his in, and Will felt some of the irritation drain from him at the unconcealed worry he found there.

“Regardless of how ill-advised this entire *relationship*--” she hissed the word “--is, there are greater issues to address. Your mental health, for one.”

“Alana, I’m fine. I’m better than I’ve been since you’ve known me,” Will assured her earnestly. His voice was that of an anxious professor in a Quantico classroom, not the man who stood before her now.

“Jack sent you to Hannibal for a reason. Trauma of the severity you experienced requires ongoing treatment. You needed a therapist,” Alana replied with shining, honest eyes.

“I needed someone who understood me,” Will returned, fixing his sight on a side table where there was a god-awful arrangement of orchids interspersed among white and gray feathers.

“We can find a doctor who will help,” she pleaded.

Will’s eyes dropped to the floor and his jaw clenched. He spoke to the ground when he said, “I think it’s time for you to leave, Alana.”

When Will looked back in her direction, it was to peer over her shoulder at the server bringing an armful of coats to the front entrance, and it was this man he directed his next words at, “Could you please call Dr. Bloom a cab?”

Alana seethed before him, even as her eyes reflected her sadness. She was setting her shoulders back and opening her mouth to let Will know what she thought of his suggestion when she was stopped short by the argument escalating on the walkway just feet from the steps to the front door. Will and Alana both whipped their heads to look as they heard Miles’ raised voice.

“--things you don’t know *shit* about!” he growled at Frederick. Chilton tilted his body away from the threatening man, sensibly concerned for his well-being.

A small indignant puff of air passed through Chilton’s lips as he responded, “This is outrageous. I have never been spoken to in such--”

“I highly doubt that,” Serena cut in from behind Miles.

Chilton kept his distance but considered Serena with appraising eyes.

“Oh, Serena,” Chilton addressed, pity painted theatrically across his face. “Was the wait unbearable while your new caller frittered away the late Mr. Reeves’ life insurance? I understand Mrs. Reeves is quite destitute now.”

Serena's mouth gaped as a stricken look formed on her face. Miles' hulking body stepped forward in defense of the blonde woman, a new threat on his lips and a hand reaching toward Frederick's lapels.

"I will sue you both! My lawyer--" Frederick shouted in a high pitch as Miles simultaneously roared, "You pretentious son of a--"

The ugliness unfolding was a dog whistle to Hannibal's ears, and the man smoothly sidestepped the couple putting on their coats to approach the escalating conflict on his front walk.

"Miles, Frederick," Hannibal addressed the pair, his sonorous voice momentarily pausing their threats.

Will took half a step sideways in the foyer to see around Hannibal's body to Frederick and Miles, who appeared relieved and shame-faced respectively. Hannibal's presence filled the space so thoroughly there seemed to be little room remaining for the men's petty argument.

"Hannibal, *thank god!* This boy is attempting to assault me-- you are all my witnesses!"

Hannibal's square shoulders didn't move, but Will's tired sigh was on both of their behalfs.

"Abel Gideon should've killed you, you pompous cockroach of a man," Serena sneered from behind Miles, who had now dropped his hands from Chilton's coat.

"Was that a threat, *Mrs. Barnett?*?" Frederick needled.

At Frederick's antagonism, Hannibal stepped off of the porch to stand between Chilton and the couple he was glaring at. Will watched intently, noting for the second time that night how imposing Miles' stature made him appear; he was all inflated muscle and heft, bulky from his neck to his ankles. His eyes bulged at Frederick's boundless arrogance, and Will saw in the expression how rarely Miles had been challenged in the past. In front of Miles, Hannibal stood rod-straight and perfectly still.

"Frederick, I suggest you leave now."

Chilton huffed and straightened his collar. His chin was tilted up when he began to turn toward the street. He only made it a few feet before he couldn't help but grasp at having the final word.

"I must wonder what the elder Mrs. Barnett would think of such a display," he said to himself, loudly and wistfully.

At the mention of Cal's mother, time paused for a fraction of a second then seemed to work double time to compensate; accordingly, the group froze just long enough for what occurred next to be a blur if an outsider wasn't watching carefully. Will, however, was always observing and dissecting, whether he wished to be or not. Miles moved away from Serena and set his sights on Frederick. In return, Serena pulled at Miles' coat but could do nothing more than tug at fabric in her attempt to stop him. Chilton, who should have been fully

expecting this reaction, turned around to ogle in shock as Miles barrelled towards the much smaller man. Before the point of impact, the unfazed doctor intervened, putting his body between the men once more but this time bracing his hands against Miles' shoulders as the young man futilely attempted to dodge Hannibal. Frederick scrambled several steps backward while Miles struggled, yelling nonsensical threats and pointing toward Chilton as he tried to shake Hannibal's hands loose. When Frederick had reached the sidewalk and was poised to escape uninjured, Miles' ire sparked again, and the group watched in shock as the fuming man shoved Hannibal hard enough to force him to take two full steps back.

Facing Miles meant Hannibal was also facing the house and the wide open doorway; Will watched as the older man's face changed. The ever-present trace of a smile Hannibal held when hosting faded away, and his eyes focused squarely on Miles, darkening as he tilted his head. Reflexively, Hannibal pressed forward toward Miles, his broad hands returning to Miles' form as one caught at the junction of his neck and shoulder and the other fastened to his wrist. So close, Miles couldn't use his momentum to swing, and Will could guess that he was feeling the first shocks of pain from Hannibal's visibly tight grasp. Miles' shoulders twisted in an attempt to loosen Hannibal's hold, but his struggle was short-lived. Even though Will could not see the angry young man's face, he recognized the moment Miles met Hannibal's black, empty eyes and decided this wasn't a fight worth waging; his body stilled in Hannibal's hands as the man proved to be less than an unstoppable force in the face of Hannibal's immovable object. For a breathless moment, Hannibal's eyes met Will's over Miles' shoulder, and Will sickly hoped Miles *would* try to strike the horrifying man standing in front of him. Will's heart beat in his throat as he fell back into his imagination and saw the scene that could unfold if Hannibal was given the opportunity.

The chaos of Chilton all but running down the sidewalk toward his car and Serena shouting at Miles continued around them and inspired Alana to snap back to life. As she always seemed to do, she carried her indestructible sense of order and rightness with her as she crossed the threshold and approached the trio on the walkway. The couple that had been putting their coats on in the doorway took the opening to follow behind Alana but skirt around the entire messy situation playing out before their eyes. By the time Alana arrived within arm's length of the three, Hannibal's hands were no longer on Miles and the young man had put a few feet of distance between them. Will wasn't surprised in the least to hear muttered apologies coming from Miles as Serena linked their arms together.

"Serena, is everything okay?" Alana asked, eyeing Miles with disapproval.

Serena wiped tears tinged black with mascara away from her eyes and nodded.

"I'm so embarrassed," she said breathlessly to Alana. She couldn't look at Hannibal squarely when she added, "I can't apologize enough, Dr. Lecter."

"It's my fault," Miles interjected. "This isn't on you, Serena."

"No," Hannibal agreed, "it isn't. I didn't foresee the evening ending this way, but we can all be thankful your confrontation with Frederick didn't quite come to blows."

"Yes," Serena hurriedly agreed, "but your generosity should only extend so far. We've overstayed our welcome, Hannibal."

“Are you okay to drive, Miles?” Alana asked pointedly. Before he responded, she looked back at Serena and offered, “A cab’s on the way. We can share.”

Miles was again spoken over as Serena nodded and replied, “That would be wonderful, Alana. I can’t thank you enough-- both of you.” She looked between Alana and Hannibal with watery eyes.

Will’s face did not reflect the exasperation he felt at Serena’s fawning apologies, which was a feat after a night of socializing. He supposed it could be worse-- he could be Miles, embarking on the worst cab ride of his life after sullying the conclusion of the Chesapeake Ripper’s dinner party. Alana glanced back at Will, haloed by light in the doorway; the turn of her mouth and lines appearing between her eyes broadcast her disappointment. The sound of tires slowing and a flash of headlights announced the arrival of the cab, and Will didn’t fail to notice that Alana refused to spare a glance at Hannibal as she ushered Serena and Miles away from the house. As Hannibal watched the three negotiate cab seating and settle into the vehicle, Will kept his gaze on Hannibal. Standing sentry between his home and the world that promised to creep in if given the chance, the man remained planted on the walkway, tall and broad and dark in the night. Improbable warmth bloomed behind Will’s ribs for the black-eyed creature warding away dangers unseen; Will knew with a conviction that was rare in his life that Hannibal would swallow whole any lesser threats, and if one somehow overtook him, it certainly would not overcome them both. The Mileses of the world-- along with the Fredericks, Cals, Abels, and Clarks-- were cattle to be herded and slaughtered as deemed fit.

Hannibal turned back to face the house as the taxi pulled away. He and Will held one another’s gaze as the distance between them grew smaller.

“We should see to the servers. They must be nearly finished.”

The words were flat to Will’s ears. When Hannibal reached the doorway, Will saw that his eyes were not as deadened as he’d thought; they were shadowed and glassy but sparkling with focused energy. The temptation to press his palms over the other man’s heart to learn if there was stone or fire there prompted a tingle to run through Will’s fingers, and he flexed his hands to keep the impulse at bay.

“Would you like help?” Will asked in a murmur, recognizing they were acting out a scene.

“I can manage,” Hannibal replied rotely. “I won’t be long.”

A dismissal would have typically galled Will to the point of snapping, yet nothing in Hannibal’s tone or countenance hinted at imperiousness. It seemed he, too, had felt the monster under his skin tapping its claws ever so lightly against the surface of its cage, and he recognized that Will had seen the moment and known it for what it was. The need Will felt to wipe away the unwitting servers who were only trying to make it through a shift confirmed that Hannibal was right to give him an out.

Will nodded and numbly went upstairs, feet leading him to the master bedroom. He caught a flash of his reflection in the mirror as he walked through the room; he didn’t linger to observe himself, knowing he’d only find a tired man in a mediocre suit looking opaquely back at him. His mind still haunted the foyer, replaying the slip of Hannibal’s features he had been

allowed to witness. As he sat on the end of the bed, hunched over with elbows on knees, Will realized that was precisely what Hannibal had done-- he had permitted a glimpse of what Will had been circling and picturing since he first laid eyes on a Ripper crime scene photo. He had seen the darkness reflected in Hannibal's gaze before, but he had not seen him standing eye to eye with a would-be predator and felling it with ease. Will's curiosity about Hannibal's methods-- his art-- existed long before that night, but he felt it consuming him now, eating away at his other thoughts bite by bite. He craved to shed light into this darkened corridor of Hannibal's mind and see what lay there.

The bedroom door opened with a controlled push as Hannibal entered. He closed it behind him with a click, took a few steps into the room, and paused. Will's eyes rose to meet the other man's as he remained fixed in his place; Hannibal met his gaze and took the last few strides to stand in front of Will's seated form. Long fingers cupped Will's jaw as they assessed one another. Hannibal's eyes had lightened in the warm glow of the house, but his tight features and blankness signaled his guardedness. After the veil had slipped further between them, the closed expression bordered on offensive. Will put his own hand over Hannibal's along his jaw and reached his other up to finally rest along the man's solid sternum. His body was warm under Will's touch-- flesh, not stone. Even as Hannibal towered above, Will wasn't frightened-- had never been frightened, he thought; noting the man's power and cowering from it were not twin experiences. Hannibal cocked his head, blonde strands shifting and shimmering in the low light. An edge of amber lit around Hannibal's dark pupils.

"Let me see," Will whispered harshly, a statement and a question.

Hannibal's mouth softened at the demand as he ran a thumb across Will's cheek.

"A gift?" he asked mildly.

Will leaned into the touch, needing the other man to feel the closeness that both flooded Will's senses and flickered just out of reach.

"Together," Will answered.

A slow breath pushed out of Hannibal's lungs steadily. Before he could offer a reply, Will's hands moved to rest atop the older man's sleek leather belt. Hannibal observed the movement with intense eyes that sharpened further as careful hands untucked his shirt and began working their way up the line of buttons, gingerly freeing each one. The hand on Will's jaw stroked through his hair and wove into the curls at the back of his head, pulling just enough to redirect his attention up to the watching face. The dark-haired head leaned back without resistance.

He hoped his eyes conveyed the desire for closeness his words wouldn't.

The pair moved in tandem, one pushing back further on the bed while the other descended, shirts melting from flushed skin. Mouth and teeth met and pressed and moved in patterns that were familiar now but no less heated for the familiarity. The blonde man above dipped a tongue into the waiting mouth below, tasting and caressing. Will met the kiss in kind but remained lax under the body thrumming and taut above him; Will's unusual pliancy fed

Hannibal's concentrated fervor, the man letting his teeth catch Will's lip almost to the point of breaking as he moved toward an expanse of unprotected throat. While Hannibal continued savoring and marking the white skin along Will's neck and collarbone, Will hazily resumed the work of maneuvering to discard the fabric that separated their bodies. The task of removing the slacks and briefs of the man nipping a pink collar around the base of Will's throat was impossible until Will lightly dug his nails into the nape of Hannibal's neck-- only enough to redirect his attention; in response, Hannibal shifted back only enough for the other man to finish pulling the remaining clothing from their bodies.

Without barriers, blood rushed hot in Will's chest and tingled his spine; arousal that had been readily overlooked in his quest to be *close, close, closer* was more urgent now with his reddening skin laid bare. The weight of a solid body and brush of chest hair failed to sound the alarms in Will's nerves as Hannibal hovered over him resting on knees and a forearm, one hand free to hold Will at the waist, as though the leaner man might disappear if given the chance. Instead, the nearness encouraged Will further, and he created a space between his legs to let the other man rest more heavily on him. Mouths meeting again, sharing breath and saliva and half-formed words, Will imagined he could feel Hannibal's pounding heart in his own chest, not just against his skin. He wrapped his arms around the body resting against him so that his palms splayed along tight shoulder blades, and he braced the strong form against his own capable body. So tightly pressed together, their smallest movements provided a taste of desperately sought friction; each press against Will's hardening length between them relieved and maddened, just as Will could tell by the occasional deep intake of breath that Hannibal was equally impacted every time his fully erect flesh brushed Will's inner thigh.

Hannibal lifted his body enough to snake a sure hand between them, finding where Will's body fluttered with contained energy and begged for touch. Will's eyes closed of their own accord when fingers stroked from base to tip teasingly, then wrapped confidently. The movement and Hannibal's sheer desire to bring Will to this point-- beyond this point-- were heady, but the added distance between their bodies now was a jarring distraction. So near to having seen the full nature of the rapt creature in his arms, Will wanted to know more, feel more, see more; he wanted to crawl inside Hannibal's skin and invite him into his own, living together in their shared form.

That mesmerizing need was what Will would later attribute to how even his breathy voice was when he said the other man's name, caught his gaze, and nodded pointedly toward the bedside table.

Hannibal retrieved what he knew Will had been gesturing toward, but the control of his movements indicated he wasn't certain what exactly Will intended. He laid the bottle by their side and returned to ensuring he had tasted every inch of flesh within reach; it was, perhaps, a testament to his arousal and his pointed desire for the man sucking at his pulse point that Will did not hesitate, grabbing the bottle, thoroughly slicking his hands, and reaching between them as well as he could without separating. A gasp of breath huffed against Will's skin when one wet hand wrapped around Hannibal, already damp at the tip; as Will's free hand captured Hannibal's and wet the man's fingers with the body-warmed gel, Hannibal's jagged breath and the reverent tilt of his forehead against Will's chest etched themselves into the younger man's mind as a living portrait.

Hannibal studied Will's eyes for a long moment. Will met the gaze, turned almost black with blown pupils, and lifted to place a kiss bordering on chaste against the man's slightly open lips; when Will laid back, Hannibal followed, mouth eager again. The sensation of fingers pressing and sliding was no longer new, nor was the vision-whitening pleasure of having the oversensitive spot inside his body touched with skill and focus. Still, the addition of a third finger edged toward discomfort; just before fully crossing from pleasure to pain, Hannibal slid down Will's body and took Will deeply into his mouth. The loss of the body above him was mitigated by the sheer amount of stimulation overwhelming Will's senses. The pressure from the fingers slowly working within him in tiny motions was offset by the sucking heat consuming him. As if from a distance, he heard panting, strangled noises emerging from his throat, and he couldn't stop his hips from lifting and falling in response to the sensations. Hannibal moved deliberately, unhurried by the sounds around him. When the fingers curled again and the burn faded into dual rushes of pleasure, Will gasped, and Hannibal withdrew both mouth and fingers, attention focused solely on the body beneath him and what it told him of Will's state.

Hannibal's black and mahogany eyes were hungry when he swiftly opened the bottle of lubricant, slicked his own body again with a ghost of a shudder, and moved back to hold himself just above Will. Will, for his part, was vaguely aware of how he must appear in Hannibal's eyes as he struggled to catch his breath. Their mouths found another again, eyes closed, as they shifted, Will for once not thinking as his hips tilted and legs hooked to pull Hannibal's body closer once more; the kiss didn't break when Hannibal guided them together, nor when he began slowly lowering himself into Will's body, joining them at last. Their lips separated only once they were fully united; Will breathed around his racing heart and felt the stretch of his body opening and accommodating while Hannibal remained motionless, dipping his head to nuzzle his nose against Will's jaw. Their labored breathing filled the room around them, but Will could only hear the beating of his own heart.

When he was ready, Will pulled the man more tightly to him, and Hannibal began to cautiously move. They ground together sluggishly at first, only adjusting the angle and letting Will acclimate to the feeling. However, Will soon felt the first anxious waves of panic lapping against his thoughts, and he recognized that he was too overworked and needed more before he had a chance to think about what it was he was doing, with whom, and why; he would ruin his own desire if he let himself, and such questions had already been thoroughly answered and left in the annals of his personal history. This string of panic pulling tight in his stomach, Will worked his hips upward, rubbing against the body above him and eliciting a sighing breath from Hannibal, whose head was still dropped as he took deep inhales of breath. At Will's movement, the golden-haired man began to rock at a rhythmic pace; he angled forward and Will felt molten heat unleashing below his stomach as Hannibal slid against the place he had earlier manipulated so deftly with his fingers. Will's broken breath that bordered on a moan encouraged the movement until they had found a pace that restored any flagging desire on Will's part and seemed to leave Hannibal nuzzling deeper into the crevice between Will's neck and shoulder as he panted hot breaths and became damp with the first beads of sweat.

With flesh and bone pressed tightly, hearts pounding mere inches away, and bodies syncing together to leave them both heaving, Will's vision blurred and his throat clenched. Every muscle seemed poised to implode with excruciating relief if he could only feel that tiny bit

more. Some unintentional movement-- a half-formed thrust maybe-- caused Hannibal to lift himself away enough that he could take Will in hand again. The need that had been building to an unbearable, nearly intolerable pressure was soothed by the hand stroking him, promising release. Body rigid and flushed, Will felt his muscles tense to breaking, and he leaned his head back as far as his neck allowed, mouth opening as a shaking breath was taken and held. Hannibal's movements didn't falter against Will's tightening body, even as the older man's breathing became uneven. Breathlessly, Will felt the first blessed spasms of relief as his muscles clenched and fluttered pleasurably and the ball of heat in his stomach burst to wash over the entirety of his form. With Hannibal inside him, taking his final shuddering thrusts as his own body became a wall of muscle then stuttered, the delicious contractions lingered longer; he was still arching and clawing at the comforter below him when a sighing moan reached his ears and Hannibal finally stilled. Neither of them moved for many moments as their hearts thudded then slowed; Hannibal's forehead laid heavily against Will's cheekbone while Will floated in the gentler waters of a haze.

As was becoming usual for the two of them, Hannibal returned to awareness first, assessing their state with softened eyes. However, when he attempted to move, Will kept his embrace firm. Hannibal relaxed his body again, his own knees carrying some of his weight but his head lying heavily against Will's shoulder. Things were quiet and simple in this space, neither trying in vain to remain hidden from one another's sight nor attempting to file their own cutting edges to avoid slicing apart their tentative partnership.

The partnership, though, did not feel so tentative anymore. It hadn't in quite a while-- if ever.

When Will did let them both rise, Hannibal steered them toward the oversized shower. Bodies that were shaped for violence turned malleable in the steam. Hannibal stepped out first, leaving the water running and allowing Will his unrequested privacy. When Will emerged, the bed cover had been changed-- Will found no small amount of humor in picturing Hannibal's mounting stack of laundry-- and they silently made their way to one another, curling in the expansive bed. It was a dance they had performed before; Will's stomach ached at the comfort that could be found in such a routine. Wrapped together, sleep found them easily.

Will would have remained soundly lost in dreams until dawn had he not been awoken by Hannibal snapping awake at the creak of the bedroom door opening.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so happy to be back to writing this story. It's been nutty, but here we are! (Tl;dr: Got sick, turns out it was COVID, then my new migraine medication sort of trashed my focus for a while) Thank you to everyone who reads, extra thanks to everyone who has stuck with the story in spite of the almost two month break, and extra extra thanks to all of the lovely commenters.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's body tensing was the first alarm that roused Will to consciousness. The arm that had snaked over him at some point during the previous few hours of sleep tightened to stone, as did the line of chest flush with his back; he was locked in a marble embrace that forbade movement. In spite of the sudden coiling of his muscles, Hannibal's breathing maintained a slow, even pattern-- a facsimile of sleep.

The second alarm, and the one that fully returned Will to the world of the living, was the sound of footsteps moving from the doorway toward the bed.

The steps and breathing were light as the bodies entering the room-- two, it sounded-- aimed for invisibility and fell short. The steps paused briefly as they grew nearer to the bed, and Will channeled every bit of self-discipline he had to not open his eyes as the adrenaline began to flow freely in his bloodstream. When the steps resumed, they were quicker and indicated the men were separating to approach both sides of the bed simultaneously. Will pictured the scene in his mind as clearly as he could, reconstructing a crime scene that had not yet formed. He suspected the men had not expected another person in the room, and they had been forced to refigure their approach on the fly. It was probable at least one of them was armed, though Will couldn't say who-- it was as likely they would point the barrel of a gun at their target as it was they would point it at the man who was a wildcard in their plan. If they had wanted to simply kill Hannibal, they would have done it already; the nature of a hit laid within its speed and efficiency. They moved too carefully for that; it appeared this was something more than a mere killing.

Time stopped along with the men's footsteps as they came to stand along either side of the bed, bodies parallel with the chests of the pair supposedly fast asleep in the bed. From Hannibal's side, just beyond the bed, the click of a gun being cocked shattered the silence.

And then, as Will would remember it, all hell broke loose.

The arm that had lain motionless over Will's ribs swung backward as Hannibal turned his body in an impossibly smooth twist. Hannibal's hand caught the arm that held the gun-- which was not pointed at Hannibal's head and thus another clue the men had not come here to kill him-- and he was on his feet before the armed man fully understood what was happening. With Hannibal's hand locked around his arm and holding his wrist far from his body, the man in the jacket clenched his finger around the trigger reflexively, and two shots fired off, one hitting the wall and the other shattering the mirror opposite the bed. The man who stood by Will, older than the other and wearing a hat with the brim tilted down, had momentarily seized at the sight of the supposedly sleeping psychiatrist springing out of bed.

"Alive!" the man with the hat shouted at his partner, who was doing an admirable job not dropping the gun as Hannibal rammed him backward into the wall.

Will saw the cord in the man's hands a moment before he slipped it around Will's neck, and he raised his arm in time to prevent it from catching. The cord was tied into something resembling a noose; it had likely been brought along with the intention of using it to keep Hannibal leashed while transporting him. If he hadn't been occupied ducking his body out of the loop, Will would have found an incredible amount of humor in these two men entering Hannibal's home expecting to easily capture a mild-tempered psychiatrist. There was no way their boss was paying them enough.

The cord tightened around Will's wrist as the man standing over him leaned back, using his weight back for leverage. Instead of struggling against it further while the stout man tried his damndest to cut the cord into Will's flesh, Will let himself be pulled off the bed and toward the man, leaving his attacker destabilized and careening backward. As the man's head hit the ground with a thud, Will jumped fully on top of him and snarled as he yanked the cord free. Will planted his knees on either side of the man's body and held him there with his weight only long enough to remove the noose from his neck and take it tightly in his own hands.

The man was probably nearly twenty years older than Will, but it was obvious this wasn't his first time fighting someone younger and faster. In the fraction of a second it took Will to lift the cord up over his head, the man used his considerable heft to push himself off the ground and send Will toppling, the older man's heavy bear paw of a fist connecting with Will's stomach and knocking the breath from him. The man got to his feet while Will rose to his knees, gasping. A booted foot met Will's ribs and sent him backward, sprawling onto his tailbone. The older man's eyes were narrowed as he prepared to put a black leather work boot down squarely on Will's sternum, but Will recovered in time to catch it and, with a burst of cold force from the jolts of electricity humming through his veins, he shoved the man back by the leg. The man stumbled, and Will wasted no time getting to his feet, rope in hand. The older man was quick to recover and squared up, throwing a punch as soon as Will was within striking distance. Will rolled with it, and while he was sure he would have a black eye, it did not deter him from continuing on. Will caught his collar and struck his jaw in an uppercut that made the attacker's teeth rattle. So close, neither man could get much momentum, but Will used the short second after hitting the man's jaw to walk him backward until the backs of his legs hit one of the chairs that sat before the fireplace at the foot of Hannibal's bed. The man was forced to sit but landed oddly with Will's hands twisted in his coat collar, almost tumbling to the space between the chair and table. Will moved with a single-minded speed, catching the cord around the man's throat and pulling immediately upward. The man gasped, then coughed out a choking sound. His arms flailed, hitting Will's midsection repeatedly, lessening the tension in the noose as Will recoiled in response. However, Will did not retreat, only feeling the air leave his lungs and masses of muscle strike his bones from a distance; his mind was quiet as he reacted to each movement on instinct. There was no space for recognizing the pain in his ribs or the ache of his cheekbone; there was only Will and the man and the blood between them.

The man put his left hand on the table to try to steady himself and find a solid surface to push himself back to his feet, but as soon as his limb was outstretched, Will wrenched the cord to the man's right and brought a heavy foot down just below the man's left elbow. The old man's arm was trapped between the table and chair while Will's weight snapped the bones in his forearm in two; the only sound louder than the crunch of bone was the man's cry.

Across the room, the younger assailant who had been on the receiving end of Hannibal's tackle shouted, "Matteo!"

The younger man was sitting on the floor, bleeding profusely from the mouth, while Hannibal stood over him with the gun in hand.

The old man below Will groaned in response and fell off the chair to the floor, landing on his knees. Hannibal looked wholly unharmed save for a few red marks across his bare torso. His eyes, though, were black in the shadows and fixed on Will, his lips parted, as though he could not capture enough air. Will fleetingly thought of Freddie Lounds and wondered if this was the expression Hannibal wore when he first stepped away to admire the altar he'd constructed. He seemed to cease breathing when Will pulled the noose tighter around Matteo's neck and pulled.

Matteo would have died by Will's hand had the young man across the room not thrown himself fully at Hannibal's knees and plunged a pocket knife into his thigh, taking advantage of the man's single moment of distraction-- possibly the only such moment in his entire life-- to knock the gun from his hands and bring him to the ground. The gun skid across the floor, and the young man scrambled to go after it. Hannibal caught him and pulled him back, receiving a kick in the chest but not letting the man free. The scene of an unknown, meaningless young man, undoubtedly here on behalf of someone else, landing even a single blow on the body of a man constructed wholly for predation was obscene to Will; it seemed a sin of horrifying magnitude, and Will wanted nothing more than to smite the creature committing it.

Will removed the cord from Matteo's throat, leaving the man to gasp and curl in on himself with his arm cradled against his body. Face and body marred with blood in the moonlight, Will stalked to where Hannibal pulled the young man in the dark jacket toward him. Will walked between the man and the gun and kicked it into the hallway, far out of his grasp; the young man whined miserably and thrashed in Hannibal's hold, turning back to face the older man on top of his legs. He lifted his shoulders off the ground and sliced at the air, although standing was impossible as long as Hannibal used his solid body to drag the young man toward him each time he started to gain purchase. Will watched the erratic movements of the man in the dark coat coldly and recognized the same calm in Hannibal's blank, unworried expression.

With all of the hurry of a bored jungle cat, Hannibal eventually tired of the man's frantic squirming. With a decisive lift and pull, Hannibal crouched and brought the young man fully under him, using both hands to smash the arm holding the knife into the ground. It took two more slams before the knife went clattering to the ground. One of Hannibal's steady hands held the young man's wrist while the other plucked the knife from where it had fallen. Smoothly, Hannibal plunged the knife straight into the center of the young man's palm, driving it deep enough to cut cleanly through. The young man wailed while Hannibal considered him dispassionately.

"Who sent you?" Hannibal questioned evenly.

The young man didn't answer immediately, and Hannibal gripped the young man's throat with one hand while ripping free the knife pinning a hand to the ground. Hannibal offered the

bloody knife to Will, who took it without speaking, and then returned his attention to his victim.

“You can refuse to assist or you can prove yourself helpful.”

The man sputtered a laugh through his straining throat.

“Fuck you,” he coughed out.

Hannibal’s face did not change in any discernible way. Will supposed he already considered the man swine; he could not lower himself further. Instead, Hannibal sighed and pressed his thumb into the open wound on the man’s hand, eliciting a scream that was swallowed down as the young man tried to control himself. He twisted under Hannibal’s weight to no avail.

Near the foot of the bed, Matteo groaned and shuffled as he slowly came to his feet. Will returned to him and struck the man’s broken arm, a howl leaving his lips, then slipped the cord back around his neck. Matteo was weak and bleeding profusely; there was no doubt a bone tearing through the flesh of his arm, although the sight was hidden by his coat. Will dragged Matteo back to where his partner was still trapped under Hannibal’s body. Will held him tightly, wrapping the cord around his forearm to pull it crushingly against Matteo’s throat. As Matteo choked, barely standing, Will spoke to him.

“Only one of you can be useful.”

He loosened the cord enough for Matteo to breathe again. The man on the ground looked up at his associate with desperate eyes. It was Matteo, though, who broke.

“Mason Verger,” the older man rasped out, barely able to speak.

Will’s eyes flashed to Hannibal’s. Hannibal looked thoughtful, almost curious. He glanced back down at the young man and held out his hand toward Will, who pulled the knife from his waistband and handed it back, blood smearing across every inch of skin the knife touched.

“No, no,” Matteo sputtered. Will pulled the cord tight again, stopping his speech.

Without hesitation, Hannibal brought the knife down just below the young man’s chest, driving it in at an angle. Almost immediately, the young man coughed up a spray of blood, painting his face with splatters of red-black blood. The controlled precision of Hannibal’s movements and the impact they had struck Will as absurdly beautiful. If Will was a wrathful god striking down those who would offend him with fire and lightning, Hannibal was a mysterious one who worked in collapsed buildings and meticulously orchestrated plagues.

Hannibal stood, leaving the knife buried in the young man’s abdomen. He looked at Will, still gripping the noose around Matteo’s neck from behind, and a smile shined through his eyes.

Their shared gaze broke, however, as a boom of thunder sounded within the room. Will watched as Hannibal grabbed his arm and jerked him roughly forward, Will’s body colliding with Matteo’s as he was pulled nearer to where Hannibal stood. Will felt his body both

dragged toward Hannibal and pushed back with a blow that burned and sliced; flooded with adrenaline as he was, it took Will a long moment to realize he had been shot.

The cord slackened, Matteo called out, “Carlo!”

The man in the door, his gun still held level, grimaced at the sound.

“Let him go,” Carlo directed Will, waving the gun slightly to illustrate his command.

Whomever Carlo was, Will knew that letting go of his single piece of leverage-- and a human shield-- was unwise. He could feel the searing tear of the bullet and blood seeping from his side, but humming with energy, he was not so incapacitated that he couldn’t retain his hold on a man with one arm cracked in half. Will stepped fully behind Matteo and pulled the cord taut.

Carlo took a step forward but lowered his gun a few inches. He then looked at Hannibal, realizing he was getting nowhere trying to negotiate with Will.

“Dr. Lecter, Mr. Verger requested you-- nobody else.”

Hannibal stared ahead without flinching, but Will could see in the lines of his neck and jaw that he was considering his options and envisioning all possible worlds that could be brought into reality as a result of his choice.

Carlo spoke again, voice commanding attention in the otherwise silent room as he raised the gun again, “Matteo is my brother. I don’t want to watch my brother die anymore than you would see your friend fall with him.”

Hannibal didn’t look at Will as he replied, “I’ll go with you, Carlo. When we reach the stairs, yell for Matteo. He will be released, and the three of us will visit Mr. Verger.”

Will’s side had begun to throb, and blood was dampening his sleep pants in a grisly stain migrating toward his knee. He wanted to argue or at least scoff, but he saw in Carlo’s face that he would have no qualms killing Will and wounding Hannibal enough to take the doctor without a fight.

Taking small steps backward, Carlo nodded. He kept his gun trained on Will and directed Hannibal to keep his hands raised as he walked. Hannibal complied without comment, though Will noticed he was limping from the stab wound in his thigh. In only a few seconds, Hannibal was gone, Carlo leaving the doorway to follow behind him with a gun trained on his back. With each step Hannibal and Carlo took down the hallway, a sick, empty feeling grew larger in Will’s stomach, not far from his new bullet wound. He needed a hospital. He needed Hannibal alive. He needed to watch Carlo and Matteo crumble under their fingers.

The footsteps had not made it to the stairs when a loud thumping on the front door echoed throughout the house. All movement and sound stopped. Five seconds later, the heavy knocking resumed; this time it was followed by a voice.

“Dr. Lecter, this is Officer Rick McDowell, Baltimore City PD.”

As far as Will was concerned, the entrance of a new player into their game forfeit all prior negotiations. Will pulled the cord in his hand to a crushing tightness, holding it as Matteo started to lose consciousness and go slack. Will maneuvered him to fall on the bed without sound and did not let the cord drop from his hands until Matteo's chest stopped rising and falling.

The front door was forced open with a sharp bang, and Will could perfectly picture the officer checking each corner, his firearm ready. Another thirty seconds passed silently by. Will walked with bare feet to the body of the young man on the ground and pulled the sizable pocket knife free from his chest.

Too close-- on the staircase, it sounded-- the officer's voice shouted, "Freeze!"

"Good evening, Officer," Hannibal responded calmly but too loudly.

Will knew before he looked around the corner of the doorway into the hall that he would see Carlo hidden with his gun ready to fire if the officer persisted. The chain of events was clear, however: No officer would look at Hannibal, bloodied and bleeding, and leave him be. The officer would suspect an intruder, move forward, and be killed by Carlo. A flare of frustration rose in Will's chest briefly as he cursed the officer for entering before back-up arrived. Still, while the foolish officer had drawn Carlo's focus, now was the time to strike, even if failure was probable. Will couldn't just stand in the middle of the wrecked bedroom where so recently he and Hannibal had slept intertwined and where, mere minutes ago, they had protected themselves from two cowards paid by a bored man too rich and too sick for his own good.

Knife in hand, Will glanced around the doorway. As he had expected, Carlo's back was to him as he watched Hannibal speak to the officer, identifying himself. Each pulse of blood drowned the sound from Will's ears, just as each pulse of blood seemed to find its way to the wound in his side. He didn't feel the piercing agony he imagined would accompany a bullet ripping through his intestines, but a bullet didn't need to hit an organ to cause a man to bleed out. Will took a ragged breath and released it slowly; he couldn't allow his panting breath to alert Carlo to his presence. He took one more deep inhale, then turned the corner and fixed his grip on the knife in his fisted hand. At the end of the hallway, Hannibal stood illuminated by the beam of the officer's flashlight shining up at him from the staircase, although the officer himself remained hidden from Will's view. Perhaps six feet behind Hannibal and at least twenty from Will stood Carlo, frozen in a practiced stance with his gun drawn and aimed directly at the back of the blonde man in front of him. Will tread on soft feet down the hall, breathing too shallow to be detected.

As the officer's voice carried from the staircase, his tone held all of the authority of his badge but little else.

"I'm coming up. Do not move."

Hannibal stayed frozen in place, pointedly not glancing at Carlo's gun fixed on him. Carlo moved from the center of the hall, aligning his body along the shadowy wall, and took two steps backward; he would see the officer before the officer had a chance to see him from this vantage point. Will paused, waited for Carlo to settle in his new position, then continued

prowling. Judging by the sound of the officer's footsteps, he was moving slowly, cautiously, up the staircase. Will realized he needed to move quickly, or he would risk getting caught in a shootout.

Close enough to Carlo to smell his overapplied, cheap cologne, Will drew his arm back, then pitched it forward, driving the knife into where his kidney would be. Carlo twisted toward the pain, his fingers still wrapped tightly around the weapon. As suddenly as Will had struck, Hannibal lept toward Carlo and caught the hand, yanking him forward as Will used the knife to prevent him from moving away from the man disarming him. On the staircase, the officer shouted, though Will didn't worry enough about the man to listen carefully, and ran up the remaining stairs. The officer was standing in line with the three men when Carlo fell to his knees, Will following him down, pulling the knife free, then plunging it deeply into his throat. Hannibal held Carlo's hand steady as it loosened its grip on the gun, then went limp. Carlo's last few choking, gargling breaths went unheard by Will as his mind pushed away everything that wasn't blood and pain and relief and Hannibal.

Gun drawn and eyes popping into nearly cartoonish circles, the officer stared at the portrait of vengeance only a few yards from him. He was young, clean-cut, and in far over his head. Will saw the horror in his expression and knew he could not untangle what he was seeing. Will lifted his own hands, saturated with darkening merlot-red blood, and slowly stood up. The officer's eyes flickered between the men but eventually landed on Will.

"Officer," Will began.

"Don't move! Don't talk, don't move!" the officer commanded, though it sounded like a plea.

Will held his gaze. He could see in the officer's eyes that he did not-- would not-- comprehend what he was viewing. The young officer had glimpsed something dark and rare but saw only as much as his flashlight's beam could bring into the light. In his eyes, Hannibal and Will could never be anything but predators stalking in the night; they certainly would never be victims, even if they were the ones awoken from a deep sleep by three intruders. How vivid would his memories of this night be when he retold his story time and again among his colleagues? How much would his eyes bulge and face pale when he detailed the scene at the top of the stairs? How long would it take for his suspicion to descend upon them?

The evening before, Will had watched Hannibal stand between his home and Miles. Will saw himself reflected in that display of fierce protection as much as Hannibal had seen himself in Will's violence. The monstrous creature circling Will's mind purred as it recognized its counterpart-- a man poised to cast away would-be threats even in the dimmest hours of the night.

Will hadn't considered the possibility the threat might be wearing a badge. He was sincere when he held the officer's gaze and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Time rushed by Will in a stream as a shot was fired, the officer fell, and his own head swam, his wound finally demanding his attention. Will caught himself on the wall, leaving bloody prints, then felt arms grasp him and hold him upright. His vision swam in and out of blackness. He heard Hannibal's voice, too upset to be real, speaking to someone. He heard shouts and footfalls and saw lights bringing the house into surreal focus.

He was dimly aware of an ambulance.

Then, he was aware of nothing.

Chapter End Notes

This was a bit of a different chapter, but hopefully it wasn't too hard to follow the action. I struggled to make it clear without losing the flow of the scene. The next chapter is back to "normal" again 🙂

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will did not immediately open his eyes as the weight of consciousness descended on him once more. He first became aware of the ache in the lower-right quadrant of his abdomen, dulled into a pulling, chronic pain by what was likely a steady drip of morphine. Through his closed lids, he recognized bright lights, and his fingers twitched once against the stiff hospital bed sheets. Regardless of Will's feelings on the matter, it seemed the gods of vengeance had chosen to deliver their latest champion from death at the hands of Mason Verger's henchmen.

The vetiver note of a musky aftershave, turned stale by a splash of cheap coffee, informed Will he had not quite evaded danger yet. He considered keeping his eyes closed until Jack Crawford carried that distinct melange of fragrances away with him. It would have been too simple to spare Will the courtesy of waiting until he was no longer in a hospital gown to interrogate him. Blue eyes opened and closed again in a slow motion blink as the fluorescent lights made Will squint. Jack was hunched over in the chair staring at his phone with a vacant gaze; Bella waited for him, and he waited for Will.

Will opened his mouth to speak, but his dry tongue and throat prompted a hollow cough instead. Jack's eyes snapped up at the sound.

"Will."

He spoke as though Will was an unnamed creature until Jack bestowed the title upon him.

The pain in Will's side twisted from a deeper place-- the effects of some form of surgery, he guessed-- as he reached for the water on his bedside table. The water was room temperature but soothed his raw throat all the same. Jack's patience for Will's convalescence only extended long enough for Will to take two sips, then fall back against his pillows, breath puffing out in a pant.

"Will," Jack repeated in a friendlier tone, maybe remembering Will was not the one who had jammed him between his wife and his work. He almost smiled as he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Will frowned and huffed out a noise that he hoped would convey the ludicrousness of that particular question, and Jack did smile then. A moment of quiet passed between them, Jack's lips turned up and Will's furrowed brow conveying his exasperation with the entire situation. It almost felt easy.

Crawford broke the silence, "Gave us a scare. Wanna tell me what happened?"

The word *no* was right behind Will's teeth, but the futility of his protest seemed petulant, particularly when he knew Hannibal had likely been subjected to the same treatment already. Anything Will said now would be held alongside Hannibal's statement so the two might be

compared at a molecular level. Hannibal was alive-- Will knew he was alive-- but the question still came to his lips: “Hannibal?”

A nod from Jack relaxed the claw wrapped around Will’s heart-- a vise he didn’t know it’d been trapped in.

“He’s fine,” Jack affirmed. He hesitated to continue, and his next words were delivered to the tiled floor: “Miraculously intact.”

Will wished he could blame the wave of nausea rising in his stomach on the morphine. He remained silent, forcing Jack to repeat his earlier question.

“Tell me what happened, Will.”

Exhaustion anchored Will like quicksand, and for a split second, the truth appeared as an almost elegant lifeline tossed into the muck: *Three flunkies attacked us in our sleep. I don’t know what they wanted or why. We killed them before they could kill us. Officer Babyface should’ve waited for backup, and he shouldn’t have pulled a gun he wasn’t prepared to use.* It would be so simple. Will would probably get off with self-defense; Hannibal would be tried for the murder of a police officer-- one victim too many. If it ever surfaced that Will essentially told Hannibal to shoot, it would be of no consequence when it came time to press charges. Hannibal would serve some portion of the years and years of prison time he rightfully deserved, and Will would live the rest of his life in numb, moral tediousness as penance for his sins thus far.

Will’s stomach churned at the thought of the pain that would follow severing the shared blood and flesh between him and Hannibal. Carving into Hannibal because of remnants of misplaced spite was the same as turning the blade onto himself.

“It happened fast,” Will answered blandly. “We were asleep.”

Through the fog of medication, pain, weariness, and worry, Will attempted to measure his words.

“A man pulled me out of bed with a rope around my neck, Jack. What would you have done?”

Jack leaned back in the chair from his hunched position and half-shrugged.

“What you did,” Jack responded, then added knowingly, “more or less.”

Will assumed he was referring to the broken arm.

“One of the first two had a gun, and two shots went off, but nobody was hit,” Will continued. “Hannibal was bleeding--I think he was stabbed-- and another man came in--”

“Carlo Deogracias,” Jack supplied.

“Carlo was the one who shot me. Then, he took Hannibal with him. I followed them and…,” Will’s voice broke off.

He could feel flesh give under an imagined knife in his hand and feel the spill of hot blood. As Will grasped for the right words, Jack looked at him sympathetically, oblivious to what had caused the man in the hospital bed to stumble. Will swallowed hard.

“I heard yelling. Saw a flashlight. I stabbed Carlo, but...he fired. I don’t know what happened after that.”

Will looked at the wall across from him blankly. He had never recognized how similar shock and reverie might appear to an outsider.

“What was Hannibal doing during the struggle?”

Will’s eyes flashed to the agent in the hospital chair.

“He had a gun on him, Jack. He couldn’t *do* anything.”

Jack’s gaze and voice were equally steady as he replied, “How did he come into possession of Carlo Deogracias’s gun?”

“Hannibal tried to help me disarm him.”

“Before or after you stabbed Carlo in the throat?”

Will combated the compulsion to bare his teeth as he snapped, “What are you getting at?”

“I’m just trying to figure this out, Will,” Jack offered with a show of his hands.

Will kept his eyes locked on the other man’s.

“Don’t lie to me, Jack.”

For many tense seconds, Will couldn’t tell if he’d overplayed his hand as a long-suffering, semi-official agent hurt by his boss’s lack of faith. Then, Jack sighed, and the thick tendons in his neck relaxed.

“There are a lot of unanswered questions, and I’m going to be honest, Will, they don’t cast Dr. Lecter in a very favorable light.”

An authentic scowl twisted Will’s features.

Jack leaned forward again so that his elbow’s rested against his knees, and he clasped his hands together. Will imagined Jack thought he looked terribly understanding in that position.

“Listen, there’s no easy way to say this. We don’t always see things clearly when it comes to the people we care about. I’ve made mistakes with Bella…,” Jack trailed off, then shook his head. “Just ask yourself the questions I’m asking: Why would three thugs-for-hire try to kidnap Hannibal Lecter? How does Hannibal end up holding a former mafia member’s gun? How the hell does a psychiatrist walk away from an ambush with a handful of stitches while one of my agents got shot?”

Will refrained from commenting on how he was one of Jack's agents only when it served to fuel the flames of righteous indignation. Instead, he looked at his lap and counted to fifteen. Then, he solemnly responded, "My eyes are wide open, Jack."

"Just promise me you'll keep them that way," the man in the chair insisted.

Will nodded and said, "I will."

Jack stood at Will's words and approached the bed. He placed a heavy hand on Will's shoulder and squeezed once, not too hard.

"You see anything at all, Will-- call me. We'll talk again soon."

Jack shot him a half-hearted smile and turned from Will's bed without waiting for a response. Jack Crawford's heavy footsteps departing Will's hospital room were better than any opera the Baltimore symphony could offer. A second person's footsteps joined Jack's just beyond the half-open door, and Will realized an agent had been stationed there. Will wasn't spry enough to be going anywhere in his current state, so he surmised it was more likely the officer had been given the order to keep people-- Hannibal-- out, not to keep Will trapped inside. It was a prickly, itchy thought that Jack Crawford believed he had the power to impede Hannibal Lecter's journey through the world in any capacity.

Will closed his eyes and laid back against his pillows. He only rested for what felt like a few minutes before he sensed he was no longer alone.

He spoke without looking: "Do you practice skulking?"

An exhale that only sounded like a laugh to Will's ears confirmed Hannibal's presence. At the breath, Will couldn't help but turn his head and find the source of the sound.

"I choose to preserve a dash of mystery," Hannibal answered, the lines of his face sharpened under the harsh lights.

Hannibal had, at some point, gotten a pair of dark slacks and a beige v-neck sweater that looked blanket-soft. The man continued his path to Will and lifted the chair Jack had sat in shortly before to reposition it directly next to Will's bedside. Will shifted to prop himself up but grimaced as the movement strained the wound he still had not seen. The expression wasn't missed judging by how swiftly Hannibal moved to hover over Will's bed, one hand catching Will in the center of the back to add support and the other adjusting the pillows.

"I'm fine," Will assured, withholding the hint of sourness he felt at being a patient yet again.

"You've been divested of your appendix," Hannibal impassively noted.

Will's mouth opened and a flat "Oh" fell out. He processed this new piece of information as Hannibal checked his vitals on the monitor adjacent to the bed. The doctor moved the blankets down to Will's hips and lifted the flimsy hospital gown to examine his wound before the younger man could object. Will allowed himself to be looked over; Hannibal didn't need to be informed of how familiar, and comforting, Will found the graze of his deft fingers.

“Any other internal organs go AWOL?” Will asked as Hannibal tucked the blankets up around Will’s chest again and took a seat in the bedside chair.

“Two broken ribs and an impressive black eye,” Hannibal recounted. “But all other organs are accounted for.”

“Win some, lose some,” Will replied. “My dogs?”

“Tended to,” Hannibal simply answered, and Will had neither the energy nor the patience to try to determine what exactly that meant.

From the chair, Hannibal watched Will intently, sloping cheekbones and a strong jaw forming the canvas for his dark eyes. The stillness of his features gave the impression he was both absent and painfully present; it wasn’t dissimilar to the face he turned to Miles when the young man had carelessly put his hands on Hannibal. In contrast to the jagged contours of his countenance, Hannibal’s hands were in constant, gentle motion: His left stretched up to lay just above Will’s head, the fingertips stroking lightly through the tops of his curls, and the right grasped Will’s blanket-wrapped thigh, rubbing circles on top of the fabric. Will couldn’t ascertain by observation alone if Hannibal wanted to devour him or scoop him into his arms, blankets and all; worryingly, he suspected Hannibal might not quite know what he wanted, either.

Tentatively, Will cast out a line.

“Jack was here.”

Hannibal’s face remained dark, and his hands continued their soothing movements. His eyes focused on the tubes running from Will’s body.

“He and I spoke briefly. I gather our friendship has reached its natural conclusion.”

A tired hum served as Will’s assent.

“Was it already dead when he put a guard outside my door?”

The light warmed Hannibal’s eyes to a deep amber as he met Will’s waiting gaze and replied in a thick voice, “Loyalty is held as a near-holy trait. Society demands constancy. I would not fault Jack Crawford for the instinct, only its execution.”

Will blinked slowly, too tired to choose a lure with finesse.

“The *execution* is as much a cloistered monk as it is a bullet through an officer’s chest,” he remarked with the ghost of a sardonic smile cast toward the man in the chair. “Jack thinks he’s uncovering you. He wants me to help him.”

Hannibal’s expression didn’t change as he asked, “Is this when I demand your oath of loyalty, Will?”

Sighing, Will replied, “I question if anything short of fanaticism would satisfy you.”

“Then you believe me fated to find you wanting,” Hannibal responded, expression falling into neutral blankness-- a slate upon which someone other than Will would have projected a polite, if not pleasant, reaction by the doctor. “We might still share a temple-- adherents of the same religion.”

“Bound by dogma?” Will scanned Hannibal’s eyes for signs of warning, but he found none.

“One of our own choosing,” Hannibal answered, voice warmer than his eyes.

Will parsed Hannibal’s words absently, the morphine keeping them at arm’s length. He wanted to believe Hannibal’s idea of their shared religion was one of violence, but the comfort of fingertips keeping a steady rhythm in Will’s hair and against his thigh made a convincing case otherwise. Will didn’t give his mind the space to put a name to their common god.

Will’s gaze rose to watch the digital fluctuations in his vital signs-- his entire existence reduced to numbers.

“I’m tired.”

“Rightfully so.”

Will looked back at Hannibal. He seemed almost human now.

“When can I leave?”

A smile crossed Hannibal’s face, and Will’s fingers itched with the desire to reach out and run along the crooked lines of his mouth. It took him a few seconds to realize they were doing just that; Hannibal leaned into his hand as it paused.

“For a moment, I thought perhaps time had, at last, reversed and returned us to another afternoon when I stood by your hospital bed. It was a disconcerting notion.”

Hannibal did not speak for a long moment, his eyes cast downward, but then he seemed to return to himself all at once, pulling back his hands and sitting upright in his chair.

Meeting Will’s eyes, he said matter-of-factly, “Your encephalitis treatment compromised your immune system, to say nothing of the disease itself. This causes increased concern for infection and proper healing.”

Will shifted against his pillows; he hid the frown that threatened to appear at the stab of pain behind his incision.

“That doesn’t sound promising, Doctor Lecter,” he criticized in the closest thing to a teasing tone he could muster.

“I would expect at least a week. Long enough for you and the nurses to tire of one another, yet brief enough to avoid further bloodshed.”

An unexpected laugh bubbled from Will's throat at the comment, and Hannibal's eyes glimmered.

"I doubt I have much left to spare," Will dryly remarked.

In the span of a second, Hannibal's mouth closed and his jaw twitched as it tightened; then, he relaxed his face back to the good-natured mask he had worn just a moment before. Will caught the subtle changes and latched onto them.

"You're upset," Will concluded.

It was laughable how basic yet shattering the phrase was. Will supposed the most catastrophic messages imaginable could be distilled to such a statement:

The psychological assessment did not find you appropriately stable for further participation in the application process.

I got a friend in Michigan needin' a hand. Nothing in Louisiana for us anymore.

The injury renders patrol work within the city unnecessarily dangerous.

Hannibal Lecter is upset.

The sun is dying.

Disturbingly, Hannibal did not deny Will's claim.

"After the officer at your door turned me away, I went home. I scrubbed your blood from my rug."

Will's voice dropped but didn't turn cold: "Did it bother you more that it was mine or that it wasn't Mason Verger's?"

Hannibal nonchalantly replied, "Those thoughts run parallel."

Will sensed a tugging at the line he had cast earlier. If Hannibal seemed removed-- closed from Will's view-- it was because a not insubstantial portion of his mind was stalking the halls of the Verger estate while the remainder wanted nothing more than to sink its fangs so deeply into Will Graham that he could not move beyond Hannibal's reach again. The threat intrinsic to Hannibal's nature was not the prospect that he would lose control but that he would intentionally choose cruelty over discretion.

"Mason views others as either assets or problems; he solves his problems by crushing them and feeding them to his pigs. He has no desire to interact with a world that doesn't bend to his whims," Hannibal explained, still detached.

"Mason Verger sent his men for you in hopes you would bring Margot back to him," Will said weakly, a slur tinging the edges of his words.

Hannibal agreed with Will's assessment of Mason's motives in a typically opaque fashion: "His father gifted him an empire, and he made it his prison."

Will's limbs felt heavy in his mounting exhaustion, but he couldn't fall back into the blackness of a narcotic sleep until Hannibal understood Will didn't need Mason's flesh-- at least not yet. If he'd been anywhere other than a hospital bed with a dozen staples in his side, he might have wrapped his fingers in Hannibal's sweater and pulled him until their noses touched; he might have snapped and snarled that Mason Verger could wait; he might have pressed his own angry, hungry mouth to the other man's to remind them both they were not alone in the world anymore. Mason Verger was anchored to a plot of land by herds of swine and rumbling machinery bearing his name; they would always know where to find him.

But Will couldn't sit upright without flinching, and his words were beginning to stumble over one another, so he offered what he could and prayed to their shared god that Hannibal understood.

"If we stare at the bars too long, we risk forgetting which side of them we're standing on," he murmured as his eyes closed. Will was more asleep than awake when he made his point: "Tell me about Italy."

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, not every chapter can be murders and Murder Husband-ing. Still, big things are discussed in Will and Hannibal's typical sideways style ;-)

Chapter 47

“I’m not going anywhere,” Will argued, tone hinting at irritation.

Hannibal stood at Will’s bedside, reviewing his medical chart for the second time that morning. They had been at an impasse since Hannibal’s 7 AM arrival at the hospital, neither showing any sign of yielding. Will could admit to himself that he drank deeply from the elixir of Hannibal’s presence, taking long drags of his serenity and certainty; he could even recognize the addictive nature of this particular tonic and that he was a glutton for it in the wake of their horrible, glorious night together. However, Will abjectly refused to so much as suggest he wanted Hannibal to spend another entire day sitting at his bedside-- in between pacing his room, questioning his doctors, making notes in a Moleskine notebook, and, most concerning, staring out the window for long, silent stretches, as motionless as the marble statues he superimposed Will’s face onto in his drawings. His presence was as much a comfort as a reminder of what occurred beyond the walls of the hospital room. Hannibal, meanwhile, appeared utterly content to spend the remainder of Will’s stay-- however long that may be-- guarding the space under the guise of care. None of Hannibal’s patients anticipated him to rush back to work the week after a home invasion that resulted in multiple deaths, and true to form, Hannibal charmed the nurses as much as he tormented the doctors; Will was alone in his attempts to shoo Hannibal for more than a few hours in the dead of night.

Will tried a different approach: “If you want to help, see if Alana will let you give her a hand with my dogs. She loves them, even if she hates you right now.”

Hannibal’s eyes paused on a spot on the medical chart he was examining for the second time that morning. He did not look at Will, but the stiff set of his shoulders drew Will’s attention, even as fuzzied by medication as he was.

“Your dogs are at your home, Will.”

Hannibal slid the chart back into the plastic pocket at the foot of Will’s bed.

Two slow blinks and a frown were Will’s immediate response. He found words a few seconds later.

“You told me not to worry about them,” Will numbly repeated words he half-remembered Hannibal telling him at some point during his first day at the hospital.

Hannibal’s chest rose and fell with a suppressed sigh.

“Something slip your mind, Doctor?” Will asked, his tired voice lending itself better to poking than piercing.

When brown eyes shot to meet Will’s, there was a glimmer of something wholly unrelated to remorse.

“When I returned home, I assessed the damage caused by our surprise guests--” *blood stains, gunshot holes, shattered furniture, broken-in front door* “--and recognized it exceeded my skills. The master bedroom, in particular, requires an expert touch.”

Hannibal’s gaze was steady, as it always was when the man was telling truths in halves instead of whole. The omitted words were ones that did not require volume to be heard; Will knew how many hours it would take for Hannibal to remove every spot of blood from the carpets and aged wood it had spilled upon, and he knew Hannibal had removed what he could of Will’s own spilled blood, too ferocious in the wake of the attack to permit anyone else to touch it. It took Will just a moment longer, though, to connect Hannibal’s words to his dogs.

“You’ve been staying at my house?” Will questioned aloud the moment the thought entered his mind. The immediacy of the transmission prevented him from excising the note of accusation that grew in the spaces between his words.

“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed, voice catching and reflecting that same hint of sharpness. The man used bluntness like a weapon when his slippery words skid across Will’s surface: “I have slept there as well as cared for your dogs.”

Will let his eyes drift closed and sunk into the pillows propping him. His impulse was anger, but what he felt was only a ripple of annoyance that dispersed as easily as it emerged. Even with closed lids, Will could see the tiger-eyed creature staring out from behind Hannibal’s gaze, and he understood it. The monster sunk its fangs into what it wanted and consumed it whole; Will and his own darkened shape were the only exception, and the creature compensated for it by grasping to possess and be possessed in return. Hannibal’s home was his kingdom only when he was within it, so without the sound of claws rattling against polished floors, it became simply a house. Will’s home, though, held all of the signs of life that hinted at his existence, from his lures to the dogs themselves. The line between Hannibal’s satisfaction and Will’s own blurred when Will pictured Hannibal keeping a masked vigil at his bedside during the day then securing his home at night.

Will shifted up in his bed with a groan. Hannibal’s unchanged face suggested Will’s pain was within the realm of what was to be expected post-shooting.

“It’s a little, uh, rustic for your tastes,” Will hissed through the lingering pain.

“I hear you in the walls. I appreciate the opportunity to listen.”

“Uninterrupted?” Will asked around a twist of his mouth that could be either a grimace or a grin.

“Unobserved,” Hannibal answered flatly, honestly. “When we are observed, we become aware of ourselves through another’s eyes. Our own insights can be tinged with the knowledge of that perception.”

Will huffed a small laugh. “You think I’m waiting for you to criticize my curtains, so you scrutinize them more harshly?”

“I’ve no issue with your curtains, Will. The utilization of fishing poles as rods was an innovative touch.”

Will shrugged with as little movement as possible. “Waste not, want not.”

The closed-lip smile his words earned loosened the tension that had snuck into Will’s body at the thought of Hannibal alone in his home.

“Would you prefer I leave?” Hannibal asked without any suggestion of bitterness.

“I’d *prefer* you ask for permission instead of forgiveness. Hell, not even forgiveness--resignation,” Will answered with a bite.

Hannibal’s eyes dropped to a point somewhere near the white baseboard behind Will’s IV stand. Someone who did not understand the doctor might interpret it as a gesture of contrition; Will knew the man was thinking, deciding if he could give Will any assurances.

“If you have no objection, I would like to stay for the duration of your recovery.”

It was as close as Will would get to transparency in the matter.

“And after I’ve recovered…,” Will trailed off, encouraging Hannibal to fill in the silence with the plan they’d tentatively agreed upon during Will’s lucid moments. Will needed Hannibal to say the words, to repeat the future he himself had wanted to manifest into existence.

“We embark for Florence,” Hannibal supplied, eyes gentling. He came to Will’s bedside, seemingly drawn there by the promise of the future. “I look forward to showing you the city--seeing it reborn through your eyes.”

Through dark lashes, Will watched the other man move nearer to him.

“High expectations lead to steep falls,” he said quietly.

Hannibal considered Will, and amusement flashed across his face, somewhere between the lift of his brow and the deepening wrinkles around his eyes. The irony was not entirely lost on Will that, at some point along the meandering highway of his career in law enforcement, he’d discerned not only the identity of the most prolific serial killer in modern history but also how to engage said murderer in flirtation. Jack Crawford might not be impressed, but Will thought Chilton might, if only to include the juicy morsel in the book he’d write about them when Hannibal’s specific brand of *joie de vivre* one day landed them in matching prison uniforms. But for the moment, Will was looking up at Hannibal with watery blue eyes, chumming the water around him with abandon in hopes it would redirect the monster’s nose from Mason Verger to whatever unknown chaos Hannibal would eventually create for them in Italy.

“Then we sift through the rubble and build again,” Hannibal replied, running a hand through Will’s hair.

To Hannibal’s credit, he didn’t recoil even though Will had only had enough energy to wash his hair once since his stay began. Still, the older man’s unchecked optimism prompted a chill

to run through Will's chest. Will caught the hand in his hair and pulled it down to his neck to block the cold rising toward his jugular; he held his own hand over Hannibal's larger one, locking it against his pulse. Will knew he could not stop Hannibal from tearing his vengeance from Mason's chest, if only because the sight of it bloody and beating in Hannibal's palm was too tempting for either of them to fully deny. Asking Hannibal not to do what his nature dictated-- holding him hostage by threatening to withhold the only warmth Hannibal allowed the darkest parts of himself to bask in-- was worse than prison and less moral than killing the man to end his recklessness. Hannibal would like dying by Will's hand, in a way; he would not like being stayed by it.

Still holding Hannibal's palm against his skin, Will whispered, "Wait for me."

Golden-brown eyes scanned Will's face, wandered to the hands cupped together under Will's jaw, and rose back to meet Will's gaze. They remained silent as Will watched Hannibal's thoughts flicker behind an unwavering mask.

Will blinked slowly, openly tired.

"Please."

The word cracked the tension held in Hannibal's jaw, and he smiled. Both men recognized Will's angling for what it was, yet the word still lodged itself in Hannibal's thoughts as desired.

"When you're well, we'll discuss our travel plans in greater detail," Hannibal said, speaking louder than before. He punctuated the statement with a graze of his lips.

The sound of footsteps coming through the doorway provided the context for Hannibal's sudden change in tone.

"I thought you were supposed to be resting," Beverly slyly remarked as she and Alana entered the room.

Hannibal stood straight and removed his hand from its grasp on Will's throat. His face slid into the placid, cordial expression he spent most of his day (*life*) wearing. He did not pretend any embarrassment.

"Following doctor's orders," Will responded gamely.

Beverly grinned brightly at him as she approached the foot of his bed; just behind her, Alana twisted her mouth into a faint, polite imitation of a smile.

"Think you could give me a referral?" Beverly asked with a glance over at Hannibal.

Hannibal made an amused sound, playing along for Will's benefit more than his own.

"The thing about psychiatrists is we tend to mostly know other psychiatrists," Alana chimed in. "Hazard of the profession."

“In that case, I think I’ll pass and live vicariously through my friends-- minus the gunshot wounds,” Beverly answered with a straight face.

“*Wound,* singular,” Will corrected, earning a chuckle from Beverly.

Hannibal glanced down at his watch with an overly-obvious gesture.

“Your dogs will be restless by now,” the doctor said as a segue to his departure. “I’ll be back with lunch.”

Will didn’t quite roll his eyes, but it was close.

“Unnecessary,” he mumbled, knowing his protest was futile.

“Ms. Katz, Alana,” Hannibal nodded toward them courteously as he passed by, silent on his feet.

Beverly’s eyes trailed Hannibal out of the room while Alana’s attention remained on Will.

Still staring at the empty doorway, Beverly chirped, “It’s like seeing my parents kiss.”

Will groaned in response.

“How are you feeling?” Alana asked, earnest in her concern. Will didn’t have the heart to shoot down her question with a sarcastic response.

“Better than yesterday; worse than the last time you saw me,” Will answered, thinking back to the dinner party where she had spent more time scowling at Hannibal than eating.

She nodded soberly, no trace of regret in her worried expression.

Beverly interjected with a better question: “What the hell happened?”

Will shrugged, careful not to pull at his side.

“You probably know more than I do,” Will answered carefully.

Alana frowned, then asked, “Jack hasn’t come by?”

Will’s eyebrows rose and he didn’t mask his exasperation as he answered, “He was here when I woke up. Wanted to get my statement while it was fresh.”

The lines between Alana’s eyes deepened at Will’s words.

“He didn’t tell you anything?” Beverly questioned.

Will shook his head, then added with well-constructed candor, “He told me it was suspicious Hannibal isn’t in worse shape than I am.”

Alana scoffed, but Beverly remained quiet, considering the statement for a few seconds before speaking.

“Local PD chalk it up to home invasion gone wrong,” Beverly stated.

Will knew this game and tread lightly, responding, “Of course they did. Easy answers are their favorite kind.”

Beverly nodded her agreement, relaxing again.

“The men who broke into Lecter’s house don’t appear to have any connection to him. All of them had records-- mix of violent and nonviolent. They’d never been arrested together. What does it look like to you?” Beverly watched Will’s face as she spoke, but he saw more sympathy there than scrutiny.

A long-suffering sigh was forced out of Will’s lungs, and he shook his head.

“Organized crime,” he offered.

“That’s ridiculous!” Alana jumped in. “Hannibal has his faults, but he isn’t involved in *organized crime*.”

“I don’t think so either, but Jack’s latched onto it,” Beverly explained. “And there are still four bodies.”

A tight muscle somewhere in Will’s shoulders loosened minutely; Jack suspected Hannibal of the only crime he wasn’t actually involved in. Now that Hannibal was on Jack’s radar, the agent might one day stumble his way to something resembling the truth, but Crawford’s misguided hunt bought them time. Will would gladly let him chase down every false lead and plead fruitlessly with judges for the right to examine financial records.

“Jack asked me to watch Hannibal,” Will added, knowing it would sound paranoid to at least Alana’s ears. If he wouldn’t let her *protect* him from Hannibal, he hoped he could divert that impulse toward Jack. “He put an officer outside my door to keep Hannibal out.”

“It’s easy to misremember details,” Beverly commented matter-of-factly. “I admit, maybe not the most sensitive call.”

“Will works for the FBI,” Alana pointed out, color rising in her cheeks. “I’d call it callous.”

“It’s done now,” Will said, ostensibly calming the room. “Hannibal doesn’t have anything to hide and Jack…”

Will paused a long moment, eyes roaming toward the window in a show of reluctance to continue his statement.

“...Jack has a lot on his mind. He’ll move on.”

Beverly nodded her agreement; Alana crossed her arms over her chest.

“Has Jack considered whether this could be related to one of Hannibal’s patients?” Alana asked Beverly, unmoved by Will’s weak defense.

“Oh yeah,” Beverly replied with a dry laugh. “You know how hard it is to get medical information released? As far as we know, none of the guys involved was a patient; if they were hired by someone who was, they were getting paid under the table. The handful of friends and family members we traced aren’t talking.”

Will didn’t blame them; if they knew how their loved ones were getting paid, they also had some inkling as to how quickly a herd of swine could consume a human body.

“I appreciate you looking,” Will thanked Beverly. “Maybe it really was a B and E gone sideways.”

“I’m going to tell Hannibal to get a security system so the next time a burglar comes knocking, it will be the police dealing with it instead of you two,” Alana said in a tone that made Will think she might have already told Hannibal precisely that.

“Well, apparently, he’s staying at my house for now. Said it’s for the dogs, but I don’t know if I’d want to hopscotch bloodstains on my way downstairs each morning,” Will added, watching his two listeners’ faces slip into sympathetic smiles. “Aversion to bloodshed” was not part of the Chesapeake Ripper’s profile, but it was beneficial if it could be part of Hannibal Lecter’s.

Beverly sat down at the foot of the bed, narrowly avoiding landing on Will’s shin, as she changed the subject: “What trip are you guys taking? I might have overhead a little bit.”

The part Hannibal wanted her to overhear.

Will didn’t have to feign the flush of his cheeks for this conversation.

“Italy,” he answered, eliciting a smile from Alana and a pantomime of shock from Beverly.

“Will Graham strolling the streets of Italy with a handsome doctor on his arm?” she teased.

“Oh, god,” Will huffed through the hands that had come to drag down his reddening face. “Could you not say it that way?”

“Will Graham pulling a *Lady and the Tramp* with his exotic lover?” she questioned again, leaning forward dramatically.

“This is the definition of adding insult to injury,” Will sourly replied.

Alana seemed to be biting back a laugh, and Will felt a flash of genuine happiness at the sight. She had been his friend-- the best way she knew how, at least.

“Where in Italy?” Alana asked softly.

“Florence,” Will answered, grateful for the interruption. “He’s talked about it before, but I didn’t want to miss work. Now, I don’t think I’d mind.”

“Hannibal studied there, for a time; it’s a special place for him,” Alana said meaningfully, looking Will in the eye. “You’ll enjoy it.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll be elbow-deep in corpses,” Beverly sighed. “Bring me back something nice.”

“Do you need me to dog-sit?” Alana asked, all but extending an olive branch across the hospital bed.

“That’s too much to ask.”

She smiled again, radiant and directed solely at Will.

“You didn’t ask; I offered.”

Will hesitated, never comfortable accepting help.

“This is too big for a favor. You’ll have to think of a way for me to repay you.”

Alana nodded her agreement, probably not intending to do what Will requested. Life or death events had an odd way of bringing people together (or, in the case of Jack Crawford, breaking them apart). Comforted by the sunny afterglow of reconciliation, the three let their conversation slip into less pressing matters-- Price’s new kitten, the similarities between bad hospital coffee and bad office coffee, Beverly’s sister’s latest antics, and Alana’s ill-fated attempt to join a book club. For almost an hour, Will could pretend this was his life; he was a guy who was at the wrong place at the wrong time, the lucky survivor of circumstance. The easiness of the conversation and the daydream it created lulled Will to sleep, and when he awoke, the two women had been replaced by one man with a well-used sketchpad.

Time passed faster during this hospital stay than Will’s last. It was a shorter stay, for one, which made the finish line seem more attainable. Having someone with him during most waking hours also had a way of making the minutes tick by unnoticed. When Will was given the nod to return to the sanctity of his home, it was a foreign sort of relief to have someone waiting at the entrance to drive him home instead of having to arrange for a cab. Arriving at a clean home with a fully-stocked refrigerator and a pack of content dogs wasn’t too bad, either.

Will’s first day home passed quietly. He enjoyed a warm shower, a full meal, and a brief walk with seven dogs and one additional human. He took his medications, didn’t test the limits of his stapled incision, and ignored every missed call and email. The sun set, and Will didn’t ask Hannibal to leave; Hannibal, for his part, made no move to return to Baltimore, either. There was a bubble around Will’s home that kept the larger world at bay and locked the easiness of the day inside for them to enjoy. Thus, without discussion, the two men climbed into Will’s somewhat-too-small bed and ended the evening the same way they had begun each morning during Will’s time in the hospital: Together.

The bubble did not pop until the third day Will was home.

Will woke that morning to the smell of coffee and the sound of Hannibal chatting to Zoe. The little dog had taken an inexplicable liking to Hannibal; Will had noticed her following him around with an adoration in her eyes that transcended the treats the man liberally snuck her. It made a certain amount of sense that the latest addition to Will’s family would latch onto a

new human more quickly than the others. It was still quite a sight to behold: The immaculate Hannibal Lecter being trailed by a fluffy white dog with a tragic overbite was an image forever emblazoned in Will's memory.

Hannibal's voice was low, but Will caught snippets of the one-sided conversation coming from the kitchen: "You wouldn't like coffee...not for a dog your size...haven't quite mastered 'sit' yet?"

Will drifted in and out of sleep as Hannibal worked until the scent of sizzling meat permeated the house and made rest impossible. When Will gave up on sleeping and wandered to the kitchen, Hannibal greeted Will with the bright-eyed grin of someone who had not recently been shot in the abdomen.

"You don't have to do this, y'know?" Will commented as he accepted the mug Hannibal pushed toward him.

"I'm aware," Hannibal answered blithely. "I've found this experience therapeutic."

Will tried not to look offended.

"I'm glad I could be of service," he flatly replied.

Hannibal looked at him fully and paused, spatula in hand.

"You did not necessarily have to be shot for me to take a brief sabbatical from my practice," Hannibal elaborated. "I won't pretend I haven't enjoyed my time here, however it came to be."

Will made a noise that could be construed any way Hannibal chose, so Hannibal refocused on his cooking. Will wandered toward a window facing his barn and the expanse of field around it. The mug was warm in his hands, and it only annoyed him somewhat that Hannibal knew how he liked his coffee. Will wasn't certain why he was bordering on surliness. Maybe it was Hannibal's constant presence in his home; maybe it was the guilt of being cared for so demonstrably. Maybe, Will considered with an internal grimace, it was the thought of those things disappearing as they invariably would. Will watched the grass in the field sway in the wind as he pondered his next steps.

He was still gazing at the familiar landscape when he noticed something amiss.

"The lock is missing," Will said aloud, drawing Hannibal's attention again. "My barn-- the lock is gone."

Hannibal nodded, then looked back at the stovetop. He turned off the heat and set the spatula on a spoon rest Will was quite certain he'd never seen before in his life.

"Yes," Hannibal said calmly, "I believe you'd find Margot Verger hiding there."

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